The irregular at magic high school

魔法科高校の劣等生 10

来訪者編〈中〉

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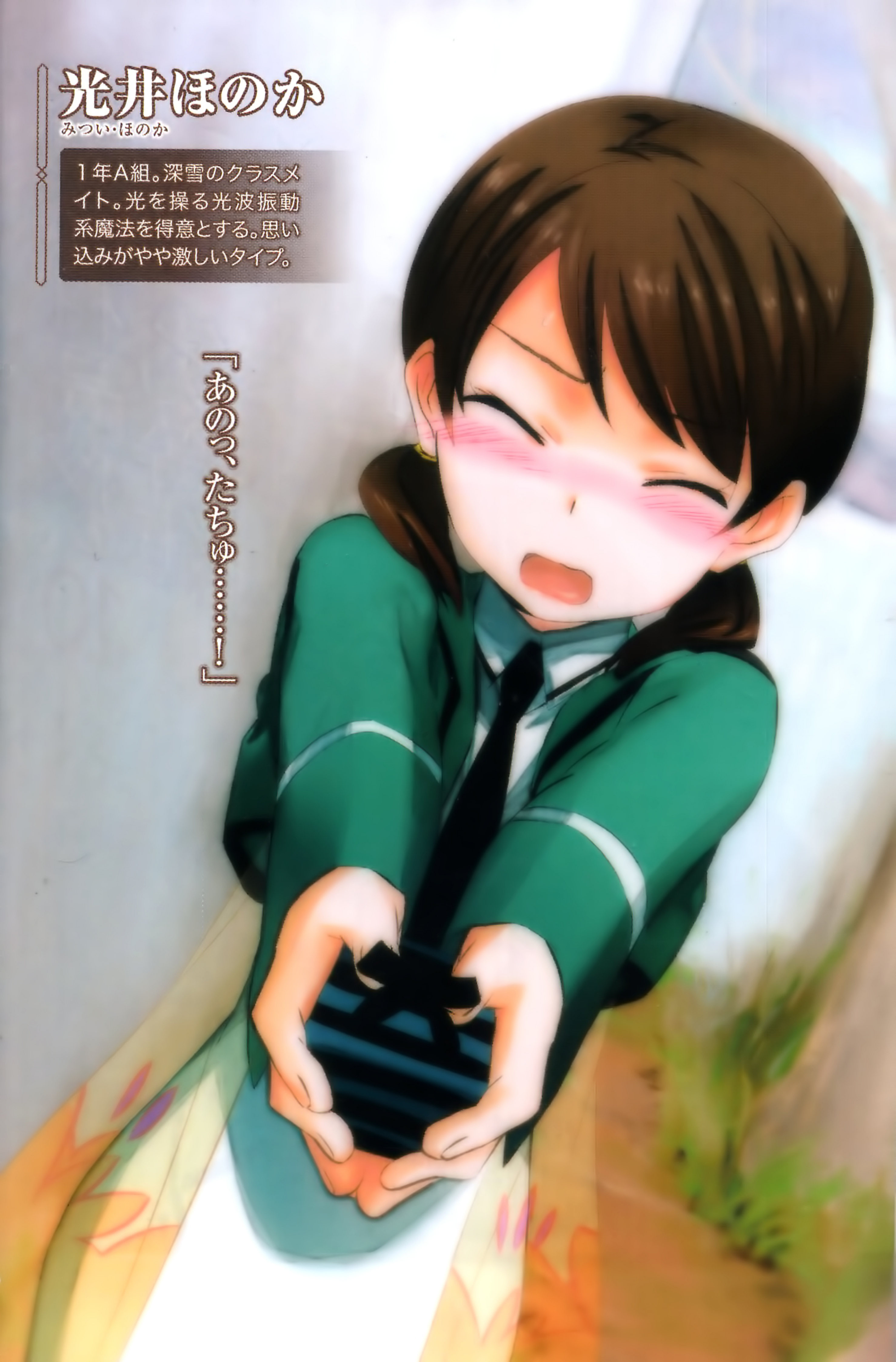
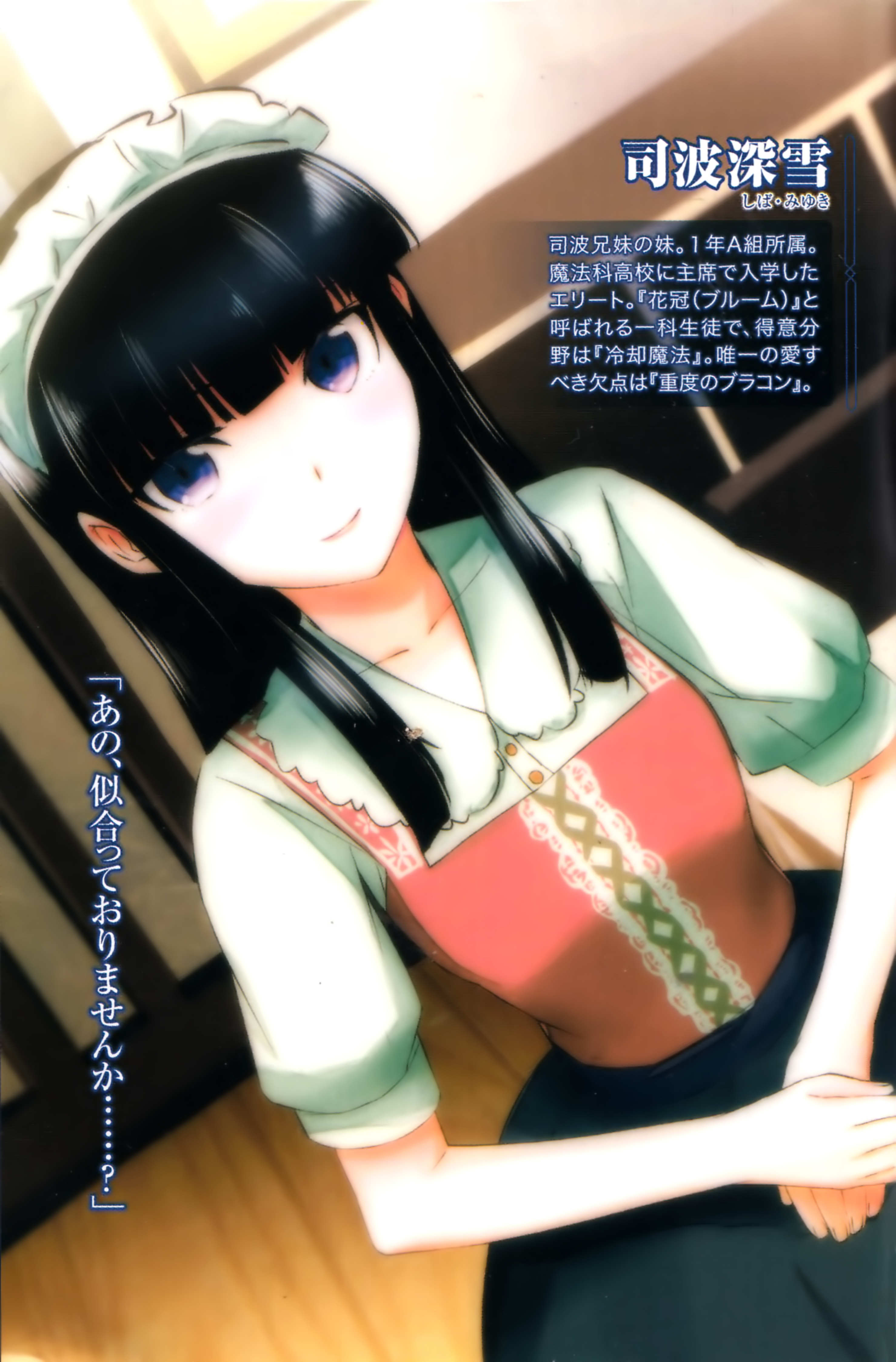
光井ほのか

みつい・ほのか

1年A組。深雪のクラスメイト。光を操る光波振動系魔法を得意とする。思い込みがやや激しいタイプ。



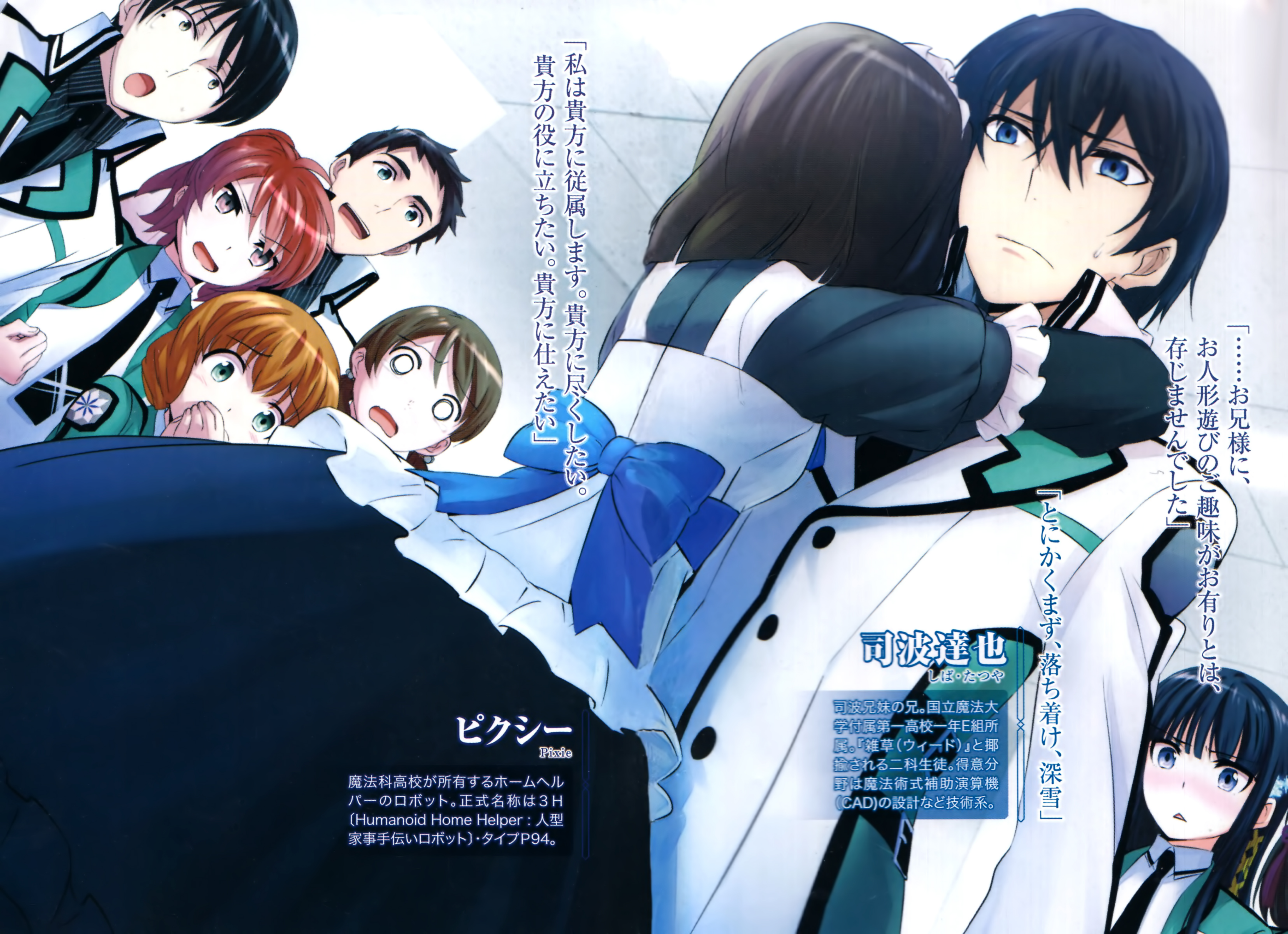


司波深雪

しば・みゆき

司波兄妹の妹。1年A組所属。魔法科高校に主席で入学したエリート。『花冠（ブルーム）』と呼ばれる一科生徒で、得意分野は『冷却魔法』。唯一の愛すべき欠点は『重度のブラコン』。

「あの、似合っておりませんか……？」


「……お兄様に、お人形遊びのご趣味がお有りとは、存じませんでした」
「とにかくまず、落ち着け、深雪」
「私は貴方に従属します。貴方に尽くしたい。貴方の役に立ちたい。貴方に仕えたい」

司波達也

しば・たつや

司波兄妹の兄。国立魔法大学付属第一高校一年E組所属。『雑草（ウィード）』と揶揄される二科生徒。得意分野は魔法術式補助演算機（CAD）の設計など技術系。

ピクシー

Pixie

魔法科高校が所有するホームヘルパーのロボット。正式名称は３Ｈ〔Humanoid Home Helper：人型家事手伝いロボット〕・タイプP94。

「ロンドン会議の定義だろう。それは知っている」
「……ヴァンパイアの本体はパラサイトと呼ばれる非物質体よ」
「私たちをこの場に留めたいようです」
「逃げる気になれば、いつでも逃げられるということか」
「つまり、あたしたちの誰かに取り憑こうと……」

アンジェリーナ＝クドウ＝シールズ

Angelina=Kudou=Shields

北山雫との『交換留学』で魔法科高校にやってきたUSNA（北アメリカ大陸合衆国）の高校生。類い希なる魔法技術を持つ、金髪碧眼の美少女。

十文字克人

じゅうもんじ・かつと

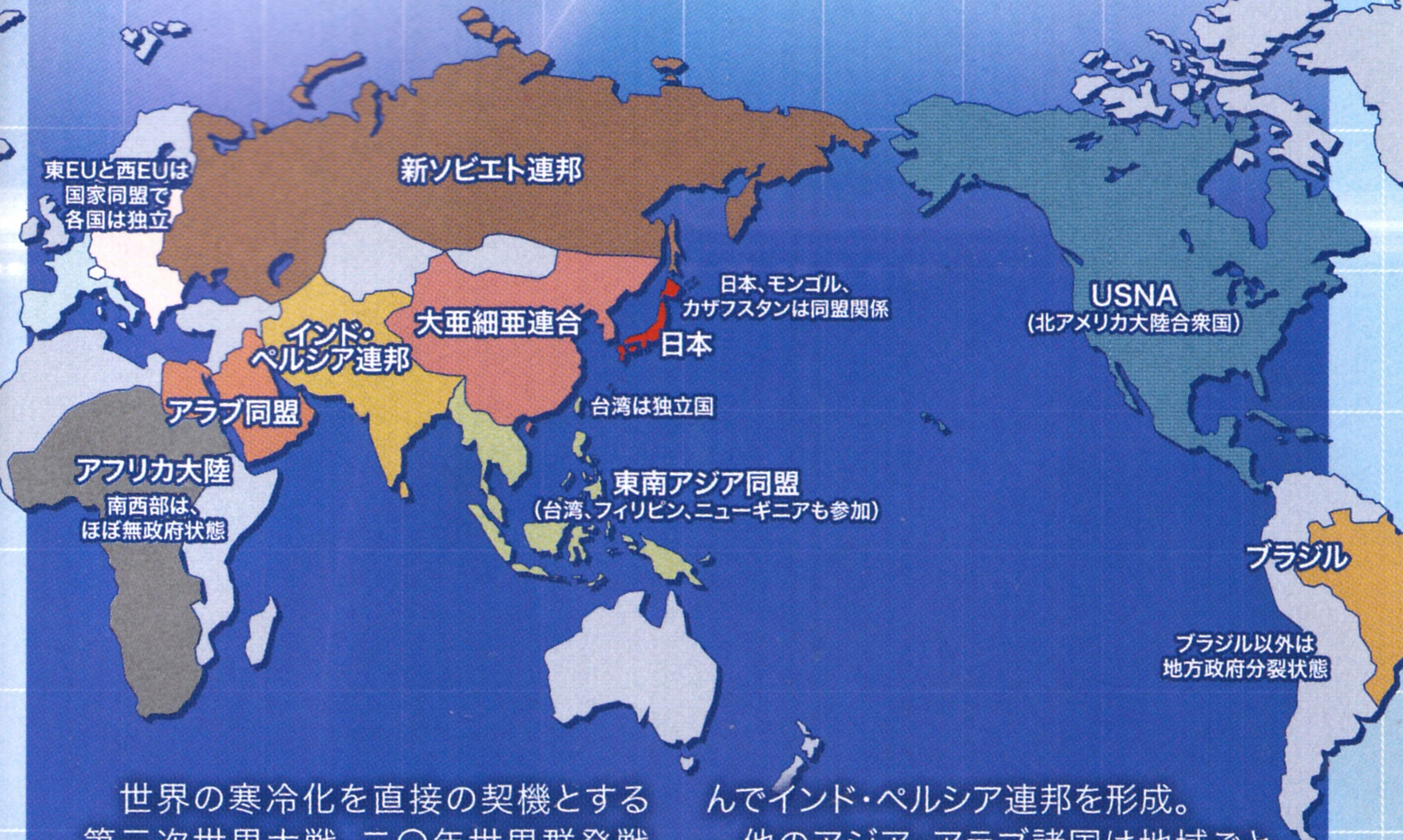
第一高校の三年生。全クラブ活動の統括組織である部活連の元・会頭。真由美、摩利と並んで第一高校三巨頭に数えられる実力者。

千葉エリカ

ちば・えりか

達也のクラスメイト。明るい性格で、周囲も巻き込むトラブルメーカー。実家は剣技と魔法の複合戦闘術である『剣術』の大家である。

2095年現在の世界情勢


東EUと西EUは
国家同盟で
各国は独立
新ソビエト連邦
日本、モンゴル、
カザフスタンは同盟関係
USNA
（北アメリカ大陸合衆国）
インド・
ペルシア連邦
大亜細亜連合
日本
アラブ同盟
台湾は独立国
アフリカ大陸
南西部は、
ほぼ無政府状態
東南アジア同盟
（台湾、フィリピン、ニューギニアも参加）
ブラジル
ブラジル以外は
地方政府分裂状態

　世界の寒冷化を直接の契機とする第三次世界大戦、二〇年世界群発戦争により世界の地図は大きく塗り替えられた。現在の状況は以下のとおり。

　ＵＳＡはカナダ及びメキシコからパナマまでの諸国を併合して北アメリカ大陸合衆国（ＵＳＮＡ）を形成。

　ロシアはウクライナ、ベラルーシを再吸収して新ソビエト連邦（新ソ連）を形成。

　中国はビルマ北部、ベトナム北部、ラオス北部、朝鮮半島を征服して大亜細亜連合（大亜連合）を形成。

　インドとイランは中央アジア諸国（トルクメニスタン、ウズベキスタン、タジキスタン、アフガニスタン）及び南アジア諸国（パキスタン、ネパール、ブータン、バングラデシュ、スリランカ）を呑み込んでインド・ペルシア連邦を形成。

　他のアジア・アラブ諸国は地域ごとに軍事同盟を締結し新ソ連、大亜連合、インド・ペルシアの三大国に対抗。

　オーストラリアは事実上の鎖国を選択。

　ＥＵは統合に失敗し、ドイツとフランスを境に東西分裂。東西ＥＵも統合国家の形成に至らず、結合は戦前よりむしろ弱体化している。

　アフリカは諸国の半分が国家ごと消滅し、生き残った国家も辛うじて都市周辺の支配権を維持している状態となっている。

　南アメリカはブラジルを除き地方政府レベルの小国分立状態に陥っている。

Chapter 8

The sun rose after the night of the frenzied maelstrom of high energy psions and diamond meteor blows.

Even though it was Sunday, Tatsuya still came to school. To his side, Miyuki flanked him as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

Regardless of whether in the past or the present, the fact that school was open on Sundays remained unchanged. School was still accessible on Sundays primarily for students participating in club activities, but also for students who had received permission to use the library, labs, or even the practical skills facilities.

That being said, their target was not the club rooms, gymnasium, library, or lab.

Tatsuya and Miyuki's target destination was the Student Council Office.

"Looks like no one's here yet."

As Miyuki said, there was no one in the Student Council Room. Hearing his sister's murmurs, Tatsuya chuckled quietly for some strange reason.

"Only in stories does the mediator take the stage last. Reality isn't like that."

The retort that sprouted from Tatsuya's mocking tone was certainly third rate. Miyuki's smiling assent "You must be right" was simply to humor him out of politeness.

Still…… Tatsuya himself was aware of the absurdity of his joke. The reason for his laughter was because he was usually the one being summoned, whereas today he was the one who sent the summons. This little detail was the only oddity, so it didn't matter if he was citing the plot of a novel.

On the other hand, he didn't have a whole lot to prepare despite his invitations. Then again, it wasn't like he had to wait too long.

"Good morning, Tatsuya-kun, Miyuki."

One of the people they were waiting for showed up right on time.

"Ara, Erika. You came with Yoshida-kun?"

"It's just a coincidence! ……Is it just me, or do I sense a little bit of malice here?"

"It's just you."

On the other side from where the female students were having their heart-to-heart(?) conversation,

"Were you waiting for a long time?"

"Hardly, we just arrived. My apologies for calling you guys out here on a Sunday."

The guys were engaged in the customary small talk.

"For some reason, I get the feeling that Miki and I are treated differently…… Ah, whatever. So what's up with today? It's a rare sight for Tatsuya to summon us on a day off."

It was indeed a rarity. It was hardly atypical for high school students to act their age and go on an outing during their days off, but under those conditions, Tatsuya was usually the one being invited.

Speaking of oddities, Erika's eyes were drifting all over the place from the get go, probably because she found the numerous data gathering devices on the walls of the Student Council Office to be rather jarring. Seeing her like this, Tatsuya recalled that this may be the first time she ever came into this room.

"Let's wait a little while longer. We can start after everyone has arrived."

"Who else is coming?"

"Ah, we're almost all here."

In response to Mikihiko's query, Tatsuya replied in the affirmative. As if on cue to Tatsuya's words, someone knocked on the door from the outside. Within the student body, she was probably the one who was most familiar with this room, to the point that she was almost the mistress of the Student Council Office, so no one would find it amiss if she entered without knocking. Even so, she turned out to be a surprisingly(?) well-mannered individual. Someone might question her "common sense" in knocking rather than using the intercom, but Tatsuya also opened the door personally rather than using the remote, so they were both in the same boat.

"I apologize for calling you out here on such short notice."

Just as Mikihiko was about to voice aloud his question of "why are you greeting them personally", his question was immediately dispelled upon the door swinging open. That was because Mayumi and Katsuto appeared in the doorway.

"Yoshida-kun and Chiba-kun? Were the two of you called here by Shiba-kun as well?"

In place of Mayumi, who stood frozen in shock and not inconsiderable wavering, Katsuto presented a simple question.

"Ah, yes."

In place of Erika, who was suddenly at a loss for words, Mikihiko was the one who gave a concise answer.

"Then, let's begin."

Tatsuya reinforced his words and urged everyone to their seats.

"Can you start with an explanation first? Why did you call Saegusa-senpai and us here at the same time?"

"I concur. I would also like to hear your reasoning first."

Interpersonal feelings had a karma-like quality. Good intentions, malice, and enmity were all replied back in kind. Calculating the proper category and preparing the appropriate response would be the adult approach, but being unable to discern the other side's intentions made this rather difficult to prepare for.

Mayumi's attitude was an exemplary model of an emotional reflex. Personally, she bore no displeasure towards Erika, though to be precise, she didn't really bother herself with Erika's actions. That being said, she already responded to the blatant enmity that Erika was flaunting. Seeing her like this, Tatsuya couldn't help but mentally add, "You're two years older than her, can you please adopt a more logical stance?"

"In regards to the vampire we have been hunting, I have one detail I need to report to everyone present."

However, Tatsuya didn't really care if they were set on opposing one another. He didn't attempt any meaningless arbitration and quickly dived into his conversation.

"Then let's hear it."

First one to react was Katsuto. Rather, it would be more appropriate to say that no one save Katsuto had a reaction.

"Last night, I interjected a synthetic molecular transmitter that sends out a set electronic signal every three hours into the vampire's body."

The transmitter was placed inside the tranquilizer pellet as a fallback plan in case the tranquilizer failed to take effect. However, the actual situation had far exceeded initial estimates, forcing him to rely on this insurance policy. That being said, just Tatsuya alone would be hard pressed to maximize the utility of this insurance.

"At most, the transmitter will last three days. While the signal strength is very weak, we should be able to capture the signal if we utilize the antennae placed on the street cameras that are used to detect illegal electronic signals."

This time, everyone had a reaction. Actually, it was more like there was no way they could sit still.

"Just a minute, Tatsuya-kun. Last night? Where?"

Mayumi's eyes bulged outwards.

"How did you find it?"

Unlike her usual frustrated tone, Erika's question was more of a reprimand.

"You say synthetic molecular transmitter, just where did you get your hands on something like that……"

Mikihiko murmured in a daze as everyone brought their own questions to bear on Tatsuya.

While Tatsuya personally believed that these were all legitimate questions worthy of asking, he wasn't ready to divulge the entire process and background. In order to do so, he would not be able to avoid touching the tip of the iceberg for the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion's equipment as well as Lina's secret identity.

"This is the signal frequency."

As he said this, Tatsuya placed a card in front of each of the four.

"Senpais' group and Erika's group should all be able to access the observation antennae, correct?"

"……So we're to find its location, right?"

Tatsuya wordlessly nodded at Mayumi's question.

"……Why are you giving this to us?"

Tatsuya wasn't dull enough to miss that the "us" Erika spoke of referred to the team formed by the Saegusa and Juumonji Families as well as the group formed by the Chiba Family. Even so, he had no intention of pointing out the obvious. Still, it was Tatsuya's goal to pass along the data he had collected so far to the four in front of him, so he continued his explanation in spite of Erika's query.

"In regards to the identity of the vampires we are hunting, they appear to be Magicians who deserted from the USNA Army."

The four of them betrayed looks of "how can this be" as well as "that makes sense".

The unknown force that was hampering their investigation. That sort of atypical individual and organizational strength told Mayumi and Erika that this was no ordinary criminal organization. It would make a whole lot of sense if the vampire's real identity was that of Magicians who deserted from the USNA military.

"In addition, there's more than one of them. There are at least two deserters and maybe as many as ten or more."

"Ten people deserted from Stars?"

"No, Erika. They may still belong to the USNA Army even if they are not affiliated with Stars."

"Eh, is that true?"

"Saegusa…… Stars is a unit comprised of only the Magicians with the highest combat rating in the entire USNA Army. That implies that there are also Magicians in the USNA Army that do not belong to Stars."

Tatsuya corrected Erika's misinterpretation while Katsuto did the same for Mayumi. The two beautiful women were surprisingly birds of a feather(?), but would definitely throw a tantrum if this was said aloud. Tatsuya concluded that he should keep this to himself.

"—Even if they are not members of Stars, they are still trained opponents augmented by the vampire's powers. They will not be easy opponents."

"That's right. Even excluding the creature's power, they are not opponents we can take lightly."

Katsuto said heavily.

"However, even if they are not Magicians from Stars, this does not change the fact that they are from the USNA Army…… I thought that any country with Magicians attached to the military would keep them on a short leash, or does the USNA Army have more relaxed discipline?"

Mikihiko's comment was slightly off topic from the discussion at hand. Nevertheless, Tatsuya probably also had a few words on this point. He was not "agreeing" with the topic, but actively answering this question.

"No, maybe you've got it backwards."

"Backwards?"

"The Parasite's influence is greater than even the military's control. Isn't it more like the Parasite has completely altered a human being? If that metamorphosis exceeds flesh and bone and encroaches on the mental level, then it would hardly be surprising if there's a change in values after infestation."

"That's…… true. Then, why did the Parasite flee?"

"Probably because it felt that there was no further reason to remain or that its goals could not be fulfilled within the military. We have no way of knowing until we capture the Parasite and interrogate it."

"Goal, eh…… Beyond just parasites, the goal of most creatures would be to satisfy their hunger or bolster their numbers, but there's no point in dwelling on that now. Anything we come up with would only be pure conjecture. Compared to that, if it's not because of their relaxed discipline, then the situation is far graver."

"Indeed. In other words, how can they expect to instill discipline in the military if there are deserters?"

"……In the end, what are we going to do?"

Just as Tatsuya and Mikihiko were getting embroiled in their conversation, Erika sulkily interposed. Once they looked around, they found Mayumi also wearing a fed up expression.

"I never planned on saying that."

Tatsuya failed to betray any sign of awkwardness at being accused of going off tangent, nor did he cough to break the ice. He immediately used a perfectly natural tone to make his announcement.

At this response, Erika wasn't the only one who wore an "Eh?" expression.

"At any rate, I don't plan on turning a blind eye at my friend's suffering, but at the same time, I don't intend to personally avenge him either. If Public Safety and the police force can handle this then there's nothing else I need to do, nor would I have any complaints as to any punishment on behalf of the Clan Meeting. Of course, I have no problems either if the Chiba Family decides to solo this endeavor."

Already on his feet, Tatsuya dropped this as he left the table.

Seizing the initiative before Mayumi could say anything, Katsuto said a few congratulatory words to Tatsuya.

"It's not easy for everyone to gather together. Let's talk a little more before taking our leave."

"Is that so? Then, could I trouble you to lock the doors and windows?"

"Leave that to me."

Tatsuya bowed to Katsuto and gave a meaningful glance at Miyuki before leaving.

As for Mikihiko's desperate plea for help communicated through his eyes, Tatsuya chalked that up to a misinterpretation and ignored it.

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Meanwhile, at the same time as Tatsuya left the campus.

"Lina, it's about time you got out of bed!"

Chastised by her roommate, Lina finally crawled out of bed.

Ten minutes ago, she had reluctantly got out of bed after her roommate ruthlessly confiscated her blanket. Now, Lina was sitting before the table still clad in her pajamas.

"Seriously…… Even for a Sunday, you're taking it too easy."

Utterly befuddled, Silvia set a mug of warm milk laced with honey in front of Lina. Lina slowly used her powerless hand to move that cup to her mouth. Letting out a breath after looking at the honey milk, Lina was finally awake.

"Thanks for the food…… Silvie, did we get anything from HQ?"

Her tone had completely transformed to that of the Stars High Commander. –Except her light sleepwear and haphazard hair belied any sort of authority on her part. Still, even her lazy appearance could not detract from her beauty, such was the absolute authority of "true beauty". Silvia could only chuckle wryly, finally choosing to bite her tongue because she too acknowledged "that's just how it is".

"Currently, we have received no new information. However, I don't believe that we're going to get off without a reprimand……"

"You think so too, Silvie……"

Hearing Silvia's answer, Lina gloomily lowered her head and covered it with both hands. When matched with her age, that posture of hers simply screamed unreliable. Even knowing that this would rub salt into the wound, Silvia couldn't help but strike up a conversation.

"Lina, exactly what happened last night? Even if they were Satellite class, there are still members with Stars designation, but four of them were neutralized in one instance…… Among them, two sustained internal lacerations, concussions, and bone fractures. They have all been injured to the point that returning to active duty on this mission seems impossible."

"Wah……"

"On top of that, we lost communication with you for over three hours, practically full blown MIA……"

"Wah……"

Silvia probably didn't intend to do this, but the contents of her interrogation were pressing Lina for her behavior.

"Don't tell me…… You lost?"

That was the finishing blow. Lina, who was just covering her head with both hands and making small noises, suddenly keeled over on the table. This situation completely flabbergasted Silvia, who had inadvertently landed a critical hit.

"I can't go on. I don't have the confidence to continue the mission. I will return the title Sirius."

"Huh, ah, Lina…… High Commander!?"

Before the teary-eyed and thoroughly depressed Lina, even Silvia was starting to panic.

"N-Nothing of the sort. High Commander, you have always carried out the duties of Sirius with distinction."

Silvia had intended to just ask Lina a routine series of questions and only just realized that she had pushed Lina into a depressive cycle. Frantically, she tried to console Lina.

"The High Commander couldn't lose to a high school student, right?"

Currently, Silvia really wanted to sigh aloud. It appeared that Lina was completely immersed in a black morass of negativity. Despite the words "losing to a high school student", under normal circumstances, Lina was still of the age that she should be attending high school herself. Setting that aside, her current tear stricken appearance was perfectly befitting of a young girl her age that could be seen anywhere, Silvia thought with a particular sort of understanding.

"Well, that's right, you were just unlucky this time."

Even so, there was no way Lina could continue her task if this situation continued. "Sirius" was the mightiest fighting force in their arsenal. In an effort to get her to rally, Silvia kept trying to console Lina.

"Of the Shiba siblings you spoke of last time, which one defeated the High Commander?"

"……Both. Just as I caught Tatsuya, Miyuki interfered."

"Oh! As expected, those two aren't normal high school students."

"...There's no way in hell that those two are 'normal high school students'!"

"When faced with atypical Magicians, it is true that would be too heavy of a burden for Satellite Classes."

Silvia swapped "high school students" for "abnormal high school students" and substituted "abnormal high school students" with "atypical Magicians" in an effort to remove the catalyst for Lina's shock and boost her recovery.

"It wasn't just the two of them!"

Suddenly, Lina raised her head in a vibrant manner. It appeared that Silvia's plan of action yielded some unexpected results.

"Besides Tatsuya and Miyuki, three ninjas also came out of nowhere!"

"Ninjas……?"

Silvia was aware that ninjas – or "Ninjutsu Practitioners", were another term for a type of Ancient Magic user. The source of her (mental) shock was not because she viewed the word "ninja" as a suspicious fabrication, but more because of Lina's sudden fervor.

"While I know that Tatsuya has connection with ninjas, but I never thought that such skilled ninjas would intervene at that time!"

"Y-Yes. That's true……"

"The data files from intelligence only mentioned that 'a ninja serves as Shiba Tatsuya's trainer'! How was I to know that ninja was Master caliber!"

"……Where did that intelligence come from?"

"I heard the man mention it himself. If I knew there was the possibility of such a tricky opponent interfering, I would have devised another location for this engagement. This is plainly a mistake on part of the intelligence unit. I originally wasn't someone with an intelligence background, so it would be very difficult for me if I don't receive accurate intelligence. Right, Silvie!?"

Just as Silvia planned, Lina had successfully escaped from that vicious cycle of negativity. As a price, Silvia was forced to listen to Lina's tantrum and complaints.

"Silvie, sorry about earlier……"

Thanks to a thorough rant of her displeasure, Lina had completely reverted to her usual self. By the time she mastered herself, the first thing that crept up on her was a personal loathing for her display.

"No worries. It's unhealthy if you don't vent once in a while."

Seeing Lina slightly dip her head, Silvia smiled and shook her head before refilling the mug of honey milk. Those words only flattened Lina's self-esteem even more, but Silvia meant nothing by that. At her young age, she had already learned that sitting through a superior's complaints was one of the duties of a subordinate.

"Though we have no new orders from HQ, there's still a few reports I need you to go through. Ah, no, you're fine just like that."

Lina probably wanted to "freshen up a little". Silvia waved her hand at her superior, still dressed in her night clothes, as if requesting her to remain seated.

"First, the four who were injured last night…… Titan and Enceladus avoided major injury, so we'll observe them for one day and if there are no lingering issues, they should be able to return to active duty. Mimas and Iapetus are as I said earlier and I doubt that they will be able to return to the mission."

"……If the two who have suffered serious injury can recover to a mobile state, arrange for them to return home."

"Then there's just me. Next from Commander Canopus, it doesn't seem likely that we will be able to mobilize more people from Stars to Japan."

"……I see."

"The Joint Chiefs appear to want Stardust as support, at least that's the rumor."

"Do they plan on adding pursuit units?"

When compared to the practical magic systems developed by the Four Systems and Eight Major Types, the research in regards to utilizing special abilities in the Sensory System as magic was slightly behind. Even within a specialized group like Stardust, Magicians who specialized in search and pursuit were hard to come by. Even in the entire USNA military, it was hard to say that they had enough personnel. Now, with this already limited resource invested in Japan, the Joint Chiefs simply didn't have any more troops at their disposal to supply additional pursuers.

"No, they're sending special ops."

As expected, Silvia's response denied Lina's question.

"While I agree that Stardust's firepower would probably be insufficient to handle the situation at hand…… There's nothing we can do."

The difference in capabilities between the Satellite Class and Stardust was not significant. The disparity was that Stardust troops were unable to sustain the augments and could break down at any moment. After augmentation, they displayed prowess on par with Stars members. Still, the Satellite Class units mobilized for this mission to Japan were also picked more for martial abilities, and when compared to them, Stardust's firepower was noticeably inferior. This was the reason why Lina heaved a sigh.

"This is a report from the other side, but the mobile units don't have anything worth reporting."

Silvia also concurred with Lina's assessment, but since there was nothing they could do about the situation no matter how long they thought about it, she progressed to the next report.

"Since we are placed in a situation where we must take care of the deserters first, we'll just have to leave the other side to other teams. Still, why haven't we fished up anything?"

The other side referred to the investigation behind the "titanic explosion" caused by Strategic-Class Magic, tasked with identifying the user of what the USNA diplomats and military personnel named the "Great Boom". The mobile units were the intelligence units that had infiltrated Japan ahead of time in universities and high schools under the guise of transfer students or within the major power in the magical devices industry, Maximilian Devices.

"Speaking of which, we haven't had a chance to speak with Mia in a while."

The name that passed across Lina's recollection and lips was the other individual from the mobile unit who lived next door by the name of Michaela Honda. Although she was also of Japanese descent like Lina, her appearance differed in that she looked completely Japanese. Currently, she infiltrated Maximilian Devices as a salesperson under the alias Aya Honda.

"Over the last couple of days, she looked like she's been out late in the evening. Today is probably work related as well."

"We're the same as well when it comes to being about at late hours…… Plainly, she's quite diligent even on a Sunday."

Lina and Silvia exchanged smiles. While her job as a salesperson for Maximilian Devices was only a disguise, she appeared to be quite popular among the college crowd as the two of them recalled the last time Mia was grousing about her situation.

"She appears to be headed for First High tomorrow. Something about tagging along when they return the CAD maintenance equipment."

"Eh?"

However, Lina's smile stiffened when she heard of Mia's itinerary for tomorrow from Silvia. As Stars' High Commander, Lina disliked anyone seeing her current disguise as a normal high school student, much like how an elementary child mentally resists any parental visit to school.

"Since she's scheduled to visit during lunch, would you be able to catch her during lunch break?"

Without any real life experiences at school, Lina wasn't sure why she was so nervous about this, but Silvia knew much better than Lina herself why this was case when she made this proposal. Seeing Lina avert her eyes in confusion, Silvia smirked in secret.

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"Tear!"

Amid the ruckus, a call from behind her prompted Shizuku to turn her head. On the American West Coast, it was Saturday evening on January 28th. At the moment, Shizuku was at a house party being thrown in her dorms.

"Ray."

After verifying the male (more like "boy") waving his arms in an exaggerated manner, Shizuku slightly raised her hand.

His name was Raymond S. Clark.

After Shizuku transferred from abroad, he was the first among the male students to strike up a conversation with Shizuku. Since then, he was the white (Anglo-Saxon was a rare sight on the West Coast) classmate who always stuck with Shizuku for some unexplained reason.

Shizuku thought he was properly gesturing with his hand to come over. Since he surprisingly knew how to keep his distance and wasn't particularly irritating, Shizuku's perception of him wasn't overly negative.

On another note, the nickname "Tear" also started with Raymond. When asked what "Shizuku" meant during her self-introduction, Shizuku had explained that her name referred to the "drop" in either a "teardrop" or "dewdrop", to which the nickname "Tear" was supplied for her. Shizuku wasn't particularly fond of this nickname, but when she asked her female classmates "Do I look like a crybaby?" and their answer turned out to be "Because you really fit a pearl's description" she wasn't really in a position to decline any further. Because she was embarrassed. As a result, since she didn't dislike the name "Tear", she resolved to leave it be. Somewhere along the way, Shizuku's nickname settled on "Tear".

Her internal monologue ended there.

"That dress looks amazing, Tear. You're even more dazzling than usual."

"Really?"

Faced with Ray's unfazed smile and compliment, Shizuku kept her usual stoic expression. Actually, it was more like she was tilting her head to one side out of amazement.

A mushroom head of black hair that was allowed to grow long waved lightly back and forth.

Ignoring Ray's eyes that were growing warmer by the second, Shizuku glanced at her own clothes.

The dress was long enough to brush along the floor.

Her back, shoulders, and both arms were revealed.

She also wore a long pair of gloves that seemed a little out of date.

While Shizuku had heard of shops in the USNA that carried the latest fashion, she was surprised to find them more antiquated than she imagined. There were also dresses found all over the place today that mandated a corset, but fortunately Shizuku's dress was not like that.

"Your suit matches you well, Ray."

Although she heeded the store attendant's recommendation and bought the dress, Shizuku still didn't understand which part of her dress stood out, so she replied back with customary phrases. To her, Raymond's tuxedo was a little out of style (it would have been outrageous on someone from her country), but perfectly matched his appearances that wouldn't have been out of place on a young noble, so her words of etiquette weren't forced.

"Thank you! It is my honor to be complimented by Tear."

In addition, Shizuku wasn't going to object to his obvious pleasure at those simple words. For some reason, Raymond's honest display of his emotions reminded Shizuku of her younger brother. In terms of race, teenage Europeans should look more mature than Asians of the same age, so even though Raymond was of the same age, he was still a little immature in Shizuku's eyes.

(……No, it's not that Ray is immature, it's because Tatsuya is wiser than his years.)

After turning that over in her head, Shizuku once again looked at Raymond.

"Are you alone?"

"I don't plan on accompanying any woman besides Tear."

Speaking of which, tonight's party wasn't the type where those without a date couldn't attend.

"I wasn't referring to girls."

At the moment, Shizuku followed her own curiosity and clarified Raymond's misunderstanding.

And thus, Raymond became flustered in a very interesting way.

"Eh? Uh, yeah, if you mean by myself then I am alone…… I think?"

Shizuku really wanted to tell him not to ask her, but managed to bite her tongue.

Seeing the boys behind Raymond making all sorts of elaborate hand gestures (Shizuku was unaware of this, but they were urging Raymond on), there was no need to state that he was blatantly lying. In spite of this, Shizuku didn't have the heart to berate him.

"Um…… Tear, in regards to the thing you asked me about before."

Maybe it was because he detected that the atmosphere was rapidly turning for the worse, Raymond made an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"Ray."

This was exactly what Shizuku wanted, but she felt that this wasn't the right place to have that conversation.

"Let's move somewhere else."

Hearing Shizuku forcefully call out his name, Raymond could only shut his mouth and repeatedly nod his head at her proposal.

Even though this was a house party, this was the place selected as a residence for the young lady of the Kitayama Family. In comparison to the typical house party that could be found anywhere, it was much more luxurious. The party extended beyond indoors all way into the yard, but given the hour, most of the attendees had already departed.

Shizuku wore a knit overcoat over her dress as she walked beneath the wintry sky filled with stars. For a Japanese female, her height wasn't overly short, but by American standards she was positively "petite". The American coat she wore extended from her shoulders all the way to the waist, but there was still a small, sneaking suspicion whether it could block the cold.

She manipulated the CAD in her handbag and created a warm temperature area around her surroundings. Along the way, she also incorporated Ray into the field as well. The warm temperature area would also help contain the sound of their voices.

"Thanks, Tear…… Magic is certainly a convenient thing."

"This level of magic isn't all that rare."

In terms of compliments, Shizuku felt that it was a little overblown, but Raymond emphatically shook his head.

"Tear, you just came to this country, so you might not have noticed, but for us, magic isn't something that can be used like this. It is practically impossible to see magic used in the everyday setting within this country. Magic is used to exemplify one's power, it's an object to demonstrate one's knowledge, and even to exalt one's status."

"So you think it would be a waste, right?"

"Hahaha…… Well, pretty much."

At Shizuku's blunt assessment, Raymond laughed so hard he bent at the waist. Still, this uproarious laughter seemed slightly unnatural.

"Besides military purposes, this country's magic research is reserved largely for fundamental research. Social services and daily activities are looked down upon as unworthy. If there's massive profit involved, that might not be the case. Because of this…… No, sorry. We didn't come to talk about this."

Although he usually looked to be carefree, he also had his own worries.

Shizuku wordlessly waited for him to continue.

"Then, let's get back on topic."

Raising his head, Raymond's expression was so sharp he seemed like another person altogether.

"First, the 'vampire' incident is indeed true."

He, Raymond, was the "knowledgeable student" she told Honoka about as well as the source of intelligence she promised to Tatsuya.

"Although the cause remains unclear, I have uncovered all the related information."

"Go ahead."

"Of course. This is highly classified information, but last November in Dallas, they conducted an experiment based on string theory to create and evaporate a miniature black hole."

"String theory?"

"Sorry, I don't know all the details."

"That's fine. And then?"

Surely she could get those details if she asked Tatsuya, right? Shizuku thought as she encouraged him onward.

"The specifics of the experiment remain unknown, but what is known is that these 'vampires' materialized after the experiment was conducted."

Shizuku pondered this for 5 seconds before opening her mouth.

"So Ray, you believe that there is a causal relationship between this experiment and the appearance of the vampires, correct?"

"Earlier, I said that the cause was unknown."

Here, Ray stopped momentarily to organize this thoughts.

"I believe that it was the black hole experiment that summoned the vampires."

There was no way for Shizuku to divine exactly where Raymond got this information and what was the basis for this belief. Still, within this brief exchange, Shizuku clearly understood he had a special power to uncover the buried truth. Whether this was his personal ability or came from an organization was unimportant to Shizuku at this point.

"……I see. Thank you."

The important thing was that his information was trustworthy.

"You're welcome. After all, this is Tear's request. If there's anything else I can do for you, you are always welcome to discuss it with me."

In the eyes of a bystander, it was obvious what Raymond was trying to do. As for Shizuku herself, she believed that "he was only curious about her right now". –Whether this dullness was a natural trait or something acquired from her recent friends was anyone's guess.

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For Tatsuya, this was the rare Sunday that he could spend at his leisure, though it wasn't like he could go have fun in his uniform. Tatsuya and Miyuki opted against taking a detour to hit the stores and first came home.

Today, they weren't using the motorcycle, but the bus instead. Sitting shoulder to shoulder like they usually did in the bus, Miyuki gloomily watched the side of her brother's face as he watched the passing scenery.

In regards to this incident, Tatsuya was also in the throes of a headache. Rather than calling it a headache, he was berating himself to be more careful. Compared to normal, it was very rare for Tatsuya to beat himself up over what-ifs and maybes.

I wish he could discuss it with me, Miyuki thought.

She didn't believe that she could help very much, nor did she believe that she had the power to alleviate her brother's woes.

However, she still wanted to hear what concerned him. Even if she could not take away his burdens, at the very least she was capable of lessening his headache, Miyuki thought.

I wish he would do that, Miyuki prayed as she kept looking at the side of her brother's face.

"I'm too naïve……"

Was this wish passed along to him? Tatsuya lightly murmured.

"Onii-sama?"

Keeping a tight grasp on her agitation and hopes, Miyuki pretended to be oblivious and naturally raised a question to Tatsuya. The words "what are you concerned about" were never asked, never stated.

"I thought the result didn't concern me, so now I'm stuck in this sorry position. Everything is now reactionary. There are these clues at hand, but the core pieces are unknown."

While Tatsuya's speech was rather vague, Miyuki instinctively knew what "clues" Tatsuya was referring to.

"You mean…… Lina's situation?"

Tatsuya couldn't help but widen his eyes at someone directly pinpointing what he was thinking about.

"What a pain…… I really have no secrets in front of Miyuki."

That's not true! Miyuki furiously stifled the urge to scream from the back of her throat.

Often, Miyuki had no idea what Tatsuya was thinking. Nevertheless, Miyuki convinced herself not to vent her agitation on her brother and instead work towards understanding him.

"I knew from the very beginning what Lina's goals were. I even had the opportunity to interrogate her, or forcibly manufacture the opportunity. Despite this, I left it by the wayside because I didn't want to cause any upheaval in our lives and now have missed the opening."

Tatsuya wore a self-depreciating smile.

Miyuki withstood the pain in her heart and silently waited for her brother to continue.

"No…… I do know. Even if I had acted immediately, there's no guarantee that suffering could have been avoided. There is the possibility that the situation could have worsened. But…… In the face of a friend being injured, I can't help but consider what if……"

Hearing Tatsuya's confession, this time Miyuki couldn't help but smile. It wasn't because her brother had bared his heart to her, but in regards to the contents of her brother's words.

"Onii-sama….. You've grown kinder."

"Miyuki? What's with this all of a sudden?"

"No…… Onii-sama was originally a kind person. It's just a little hard to find sometimes."

"Sorry, but can you explain that to me in plainer terms?"

Seeing Tatsuya's bemused expression, Miyuki already decided not to hide her smile any longer.

"So there are some things that even Onii-sama doesn't understand. Even Onii-sama doesn't understand himself?"

"Of course, I think you're appraising me too highly. There are a myriad of things I don't know, and my face is something I can see only with the help of a mirror. A created image with the right and left flipped."

"As expected of Onii-sama, you don't try to put on a brave front here. In other words,"

Miyuki dramatically lowered her voice here.

Despite knowing that he was walking straight into his sister's ploy, Tatsuya still strained his ears to hear.

"Onii-sama cannot forgive himself for letting Saijou-kun get hurt. While our time together has been limited, Onii-sama doesn't want to do anything violent towards Lina, who has become our friend. Onii-sama, Miyuki is very happy. Happy because Onii-sama has these heartfelt feelings for someone other than myself. You have more humane emotions than you believed yourself to possess."

Tatsuya sat straight forward and closed his eyes.

Miyuki found it hilarious that her brother was adopting such an easily discernible way to disguise his embarrassment.

That he was willing to show this side of himself to her caused Miyuki to feel truly overjoyed.

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"Yoshida-kun, we're getting a reaction from Tokyo Tower Park. Presently, it is moving towards Iigura Crossing."

"Understood. I am currently located near Toranomon Station near Sakurada. I will proceed immediately to Iigura Crossing."

"Please get there in ten minutes."

"Understood. ETA is two minutes."

The transmission was cut short. They looked like they were going to make it this time. Understanding this, Mayumi let out a sigh of relief.

The result of the discussion prior to noon culminated in a system that had Mayumi responsible for information control while Katsuto and Erika led the mobile units. Everyone was clear on the fact that internal strife held no benefit for anyone.

Nonetheless, neither side was willing to take that first step forward, so everyone's independent actions only resulted in the situation where they were hindering their own companions.

On that level, they really had to thank Tatsuya's cloak and dagger play that forcibly established a stage where a compromise could be hammered out. –On Mayumi's part, she was highly put out that Tatsuya was treating her like a child.

(Just you wait. I'm going to give you the bitterest chocolate ever on Valentine's Day.)

Satisfied with the mental image of discomfiting Tatsuya, Mayumi turned her attention back to the display monitor.

Unfortunately, the transmitter Tatsuya supplied wasn't very strong. To be precise, it was horrible, though it was true that the observation antennae could capture the signal waves.

However, in a metropolis well connected by the public transportation system, the target could cover a whole lot of ground in three hours.

Furthermore, the signal was only emitted once every ten minutes. In short, they had to catch the target within this time frame.

This time, it was only after they used the street cameras' observation system that they found out for the first time that they could not pursue the vampire using the street cameras alone. Much like legends and fiction, the camera could not snap a picture of their head. Still, legends and fiction weren't entirely mistaken. No matter how they adjusted the focal point, they could only get a murky picture of the vampire's body.

This was especially the case above the neck. There was no way to differentiate facial features. The street camera system was designed to be a pursuit tool that was founded on the basis of facial recognition, so it was practically pointless if it could not differentiate facial features.

The task force from the Saegusa Family concluded that since there was no sign of mechanical failure, the target probably used magic to disrupt the optics.

This was the reason why the target had eluded them three hours ago and six hours ago. Thus, the hunt continued deep into the night.

Fortunately, this time they seemed to be right on the money.

Mayumi coordinated the collapsing ring of pursuers while opening a line of communication with Katsuto, who was still investigating in the Shiodome District.

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Early in the week, Tatsuya found a rather familiar sight these past couple of days plopped in front of him in the classroom.

Erika was sprawled over her desk. She might have been better off coming to school later, since she seemed completely exhausted.

(Scratch that, did she pull an all-nighter?)

"……Um, shouldn't we wake her up?"

Mizuki, who met them earlier at the station, asked him quietly.

She was so soundly asleep that even normal speaking volume failed to rouse her. Although Mizuki knew this at a glance, it was precisely Mizuki's style to lower her volume even so.

"Just let her sleep."

Tatsuya's reply was fairly simple. To be precise, it was the practical response.

Even if they managed to wake her, it was plain that she wouldn't have access to major mental facilities prior to noon, though in reality, Tatsuya really didn't have the spare energy to worry about other people's mental framework at the moment.

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In order to address Tatsuya's lack of spare energy, we must return to half a day before.

Actually, coincidentally after Tatsuya and Miyuki finished dinner, the telephone rang.

Right now, this wasn't exactly an odd hour for a call. –At least for the side who received the phone call.

However, this was late at night for the American West Coast and approached the time for the day change. It wouldn't be a surprise if Tatsuya was a little nervous over what happened.

"Hello, Shizuku? Did something happen?"

As predicted, the one who appeared on the screen was her. However, her appearance that came through the picture was wholly expected.

Shizuku looked like she was wearing her pajamas. Following the height of fashion, her sleeping garment failed to include a robe.

Answering the phone in the living room was a bad idea. The large, high definition image projected a brilliant picture that was in no way inferior to real life.

Maybe it was because they were pajamas, but the light luminescent material was not covering much of Shizuku's slim figure.

Tatsuya had seen Shizuku's swimsuit during the summer, but the picture Shizuku presented now was even more alluring.

This was probably the effect of the faintly discernible hinting at the hidden portions. It was one thing if nothing could be seen, but the effect was aggravated when the curves were being hinted at.

Based on the image, Shizuku wasn't wearing underclothes. Although the massive amounts of lace and trimmings covered up the important parts, if the article of clothing was slightly out of place then even the unmentionables would be revealed.

Under normal circumstances, even Tatsuya would raise an eyebrow. Fortunately, concern carried great weight on his part right now, so he wasn't awkwardly flustered.

"Shizuku? What are you doing!?"

Yet, even someone of the same gender who caught a glimpse of this, Miyuki, was blushing – that's how much she was flustered.

"Ah, Miyuki, good evening."

"Stop with the greeting! At least put on a robe!"

"……It's OK, right?"

She wore an expression of skepticism, but Shizuku obediently pulled on a robe slowly.

"Sorry for the late hour."

Afterwards, she once again started the conversation anew after bowing her head.

"It's not that late over here…… Wait, have you been drinking?"

Shizuku's tone sounded tired but there was something strange, like an odd lint in her voice.

"Drink what?"

Of course that would be, no matter how much Tatsuya wanted to finish the comment, he opted to swallow his words. That was because he realized that voicing that aloud had achieved nothing since the dawn of time.

"Never mind, what were you speaking of?"

Her cognitive powers seemed to have declined as well, but she wouldn't have called for no reason. Tatsuya determined that it was best to get the information from her as quickly as possible.

"Hm, I think I should tell you sooner rather than later."

Tell me what? Surely he should be praised for discerning the topic without blatantly asking the question.

"Do you already know? Impressive."

"Please praise me more."

Hearing Shizuku use a plain tone to flirt, Tatsuya suddenly felt a strong sense of powerlessness wash over him.

(……Who allowed Shizuku to drink?)

Shizuku was clearly inebriated. Given that, she appeared to have become more childish.

"No, you're quite amazing, Shizuku. Then, what have you found out?"

It was not his intent to pressure the other side who was calling at a late hour (from her end), but it was probably better for everyone involved to end the call as soon as possible. Even if she was drunk, she wasn't wasted enough to lose her memory.

"The reason behind the vampire's appearance."

Still, this was a more central piece of the puzzle than he had expected. Tatsuya and Miyuki both leaned forward.

"String…… That is, string something related to black hole experiments."

"Huh? Black hole? Shizuku, what are you referring to?"

Immediately afterward, since there were a few unexpected and vague terms being bandied about, there was an array of question marks dancing over Miyuki's head.

Exactly – over Miyuki's head.

"I don't know. I was planning on asking Tatsuya."

"Using string theory as a foundation to create miniature black holes? You are referring to the annihilation effect, correct?"

Tatsuya verified in a low, stiff voice.

"That's it. You got it."

Shizuku seemed to have missed the alteration in the tone (there was no physical sign she picked up on that), but Miyuki timidly peeked at her brother's expression.

"So they did that……"

His voice was steady as usual, no, perhaps more calm than his usual tone.

Yet, that was because Tatsuya had suffered a serious shock, a detail that no one else could understand save Miyuki.

"What is that?"

At this point, Miyuki really wanted to hang up. Using "It's very late" as an excuse, she planned on terminating the call because she didn't want to sour Tatsuya's mood any worse than it was.

Unfortunately, before that could happen, Shizuku had already voiced a concise question,

"A detailed explanation would be too complex so I'll be brief."

Tatsuya also began his answer.

"It is an experiment designed to extract energy out of a miniature version of an artificial black hole. Scientists believe that during the evaporation process of black hole creation, matter will be transformed into thermal energy. Their goal was to verify this."

Her attempt to terminate the conversation a failure, Miyuki had no choice but to listen to her brother's explanation, but her heart was completely frazzled by the term energy transformation. The warning they received from their aunt rang once more in Miyuki's mind.

"That's string theory? That's how they can extract energy from other dimensions?"

Of course, Shizuku was oblivious to Miyuki's concerns and was simply immersed in the back and forth as a drunk scholar.

"No, the process of extracting energy is in itself unrelated to other dimensions. That's because they have predicted the evaporation of the miniature black hole that has nothing to do with its creation process. String theory refers to the idea that this world is like the outer layer of another world of a higher order. In terms of physical energy, only gravity can permeate the dimensional barrier, so gravity allows most forms of energy to leak into other dimensions. This theory also implies that our dimension is only able to observe energy from higher dimensions at a much smaller scale. However, the tiny distance at the atomic level will still initiate a reaction with similar objects prior to leaking to another dimension and will have a greater gravitational attraction than normal. Thus, based on string theory, creation of a miniature black hole can be accomplished with minimal energy. That is the theoretical background behind the experiment to create an artificial black hole on a miniature scale using string theory."

"……Miyuki, did you get that?"

"Alas, no. I don't really understand it either."

Seeing Shizuku shaking her head back and forth, Miyuki also smiled wryly and shook her head.

"But Onii-sama, how does this topic relate to the vampires……?"

Afterward, Miyuki hesitantly ventured forth a question while glancing upwards at her brother's face at a close proximity.

Tatsuya glanced downward towards his sister and flicked his eyes over to Shizuku's image before talking about a series of seemingly unconnected points.

"Energy is not required if the phenomenon alteration was done by magic. Nor is there any sign of physical energy being supplied. Everyone also believes that there is no ethereal energy within this physical realm that can be converted into physical energy. Nevertheless, Move-Type and Acceleration Magic have clearly altered energy values before and after magic invocation. Based on this, magic is not bound by the conservation of energy. Through magic, we can plainly see this law being circumvented."

"I recall that this is known as one of the greatest paradoxes within modern magic."

"That was the proposition, though the consensus is that the proposition itself was imperfect."

Tatsuya darted a quick glance at Shizuku's expression over the monitor. Her speech was rather peculiar – almost as if she was stuttering. Regardless, there was no sign that she was going to fall asleep any time soon. Given how the light of curiosity danced across her eyes, there was little chance she would accept an excuse like "Let's talk about it next time". Inebriated individuals were a little stubborn like that. After considering this, Tatsuya elected to continue.

"You are correct, Shizuku. Superficially, this appears to subvert the law of conservation of energy. In the first place, the law of conservation of energy is a deduced law, so it is impossible for physical phenomena to run counter to this.

So long as magic brings about a physical reaction, then at least restricted within those conditions, the law of conservation of energy should still be observed. While there may be short periods of time during psion activation where the law seems to be circumvented, energy conservation is still observed when taking the entire process into account post fact. Thus, when magic brings about a physical phenomenon, then within that event, the law of conservation of energy should still apply. Of course, the law of conservation of energy refers to the concept of energy remaining constant within a closed system. If there's a record of fluctuating energy levels, then that must mean there is an observation error or that the system is not a closed one."

"Magic has observed that this world is not a closed system…… That certainly brings to mind string theory from our earlier conversation."

"I see! So the energy needed for magic is supplied by an alternate dimension?"

"Recently, we've seen a growing number of magic researchers supporting that theory. I too subscribe to this line of thinking. Working under the assumption that string theory is true, then we should consider what it means if gravity is the only force that can pass between alternate dimensions. What I am about to say has no theoretical basis and approaches pure speculation……"

Miyuki and Shizuku wordlessly watched Tatsuya's contemplative look.

"It is a possibility that the gravity that acts in the alternate dimension is what supports the dimensional barrier. Under the assumption that magic breaks through this barrier, energy might be removed from the alternate dimension. While it is true that magic is a phenomenon that does not require energy, that does not guarantee that no energy is involved whatsoever. Even within observable parameters, there is a tendency for magic to fail when the total magic output is zero."

Mystified, Miyuki and Shizuku kept their eyes locked on Tatsuya as he looked inward.

"Most likely, the Magic Sequence reverses the insufficient energy needed for phenomena alteration and extracts that insufficient energy from the alternate dimension. In regard to the physical energy supply that cannot be observed, then if we assume that the energy from the alternate dimension has ethereal qualities, or more simply magical energy, then the law of conservation of physical energy is observed after the Magic Sequence is completed."

Although they did not completely understand what Tatsuya was saying, the two young ladies perked up their ears because they felt that his words were of vital importance to Magicians.

"The other side of the dimensional barrier contains a dimension filled with magical energy and, in order to prevent this energy from leaking to the physical dimension, gravity supports the dimensional barrier and prevents any leakage. However, magic can penetrate this barrier in order to make up for the deficiency in energy by drawing from magic energy. –My belief is that this is the system that solves the major paradox to modern magic. On the other hand, based on the miniature artificial black hole developed through calculations in string theory, gravity acting on the dimensional barrier would be wasted by the creation of the black hole. In that case, the dimensional barrier fluctuates the instant the black hole materializes."

"The dimensional barrier fluctuates…… What happens then?"

"Magical energy that is beyond the control of Magic Sequences may seep through……?"

Divided by the image, Miyuki and Shizuku shared a glance. The high definition camera and monitor displayed the terror that reflected in their eyes.

"Energy spontaneously structures itself and forms an information body. If not, the universe would have already turned into homogenous nothingness.

Magical energy from an alternate dimension should follow a similar pattern. The moment the dimensional barrier weakens, the possibility that magical energy from an alternate dimension invading this world in the form of information bodies is not zero. At least, that is my perspective."

On the other side of the monitor, Shizuku's body was shaking slightly.

On this side, Miyuki latched onto Tatsuya's arm as if she never wanted to let go.

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Mikihiko finally showed up in class after the second period was over.

"Is it done?"

He wasn't late.

Today, he was also being cared for in the infirmary.

"Tatsuya…… I hate you."

Initially, the tone was out of concern, but what came afterwards was a heavy tone of complaint.

"Hey, that's not very friendly."

While the words were probably in jest, the emotions laden within were definitely true.

After overhearing those words, Mizuki shrank back in fright.

"If all I'm going to do is complain, you might as well let me vent it all out. After that, do you know how painful my memory of that ulcer was……?"

"Saegusa-senpai just sat there smiling without a single word, Erika shut her mouth with a totally displeased look on her face…… I was the only one who had to keep talking.

That empty feeling was like sitting on pins and needles."

"Didn't Juumonji-senpai say anything?"

"Do you think that kind of person would do something so trivial like interfering?"

In that case, that's true.

Mayumi, Erika, and Katsuto all acted in concert with their "personality".

"Well…… There's no real reason, but I understand that must have been a tough time for you."

Mikihiko seemed to be a little healed by Mizuki's undisguised words of comfort.

Next to Mizuki, Erika remained sprawled over her desk.

Erika finally revived around lunch time. Maybe because she was finally revitalized, she grabbed onto Mizuki and started complaining.

"Did you hear? Up until now, there was only one of them fleeing, but now suddenly there are three of them. Don't you think that's devious?"

Probably taking into account how terrible it would be if someone accidentally overheard them in the cafeteria, Erika skipped lunch and dragged Mizuki into an empty classroom – the lab that Mikihiko frequented.

"Um, is that so?"

Mizuki nodded to follow along, but in reality, she wasn't entirely sure what Erika was referring to.

She hazarded a guess that this was about the "vampire" incident, but she wasn't aware of the specifics. "Do we count vampires by ones or twos?" was the thought running through Mizuki's head.

"……Before that, you better hurry to the cafeteria. Lunch break is almost over, right?"

"I'm not really hungry."

That's because you've been asleep the whole time! Mizuki really wanted to point that out, but felt that doing so would throw Erika into an irretrievable sulk, so she opted against it.

(Ha…… I give up.)

She wasn't fasting – not that she pursued that habit(?) – Mizuki absconded from lunch. There was no physical education or technical skills class later today, so skipping out on one meal wasn't going to be that detrimental, she told herself. Compared to that, there was something she was more worried about.

"Hey, Erika-chan. Why did you get into a fight with Tatsuya?"

In that instant, Erika's shoulders started shaking.

"W-what are you talking about, Mizuki. We totally aren't. Definitely not."

She emphatically shook her head and waved both hands.

As a result of letting her hair grow out since spring, her long ponytail – Erika's favorite hairstyle – also danced back and forth with her head.

"There's no need to panic…… It's not like I thought Erika-chan did something to Tatsuya.

Even if you cause a fuss, wouldn't Tatsuya just smile and accept it?

So if Erika-chan was the reason, there is no way there could be conflict between the two of you."

"Um, well, I'm really not sure if that was a compliment or an insult……"

Just like her words, Erika wore an "undecided" expression as she lodged a protest. Probably.

"I am doing neither. I am merely stating the situation as it is."

On the other hand, Mizuki decisively pressed on.

"Even if you put it like that, I still feel I can't accept that!"

"Yes, yes. At any rate, I don't think Erika-chan is the reason."

The indignant riposte that was lacking in fervor was easily ignored.

"Mizuki, you've gotten stronger……"

"If you don't want to talk about it, do you think I will stop asking?"

Erika's attempt to use a comedic line to muddle the issue was met with a fastball right back at her.

Powerlessly, Erika slumped down.

"We're really not fighting…… It's just that I'm feeling awkward from my side.

I don't plan on dragging this into tomorrow, so can you go easy on me today?"

Her head tilted, Erika weakly peeked out between the gaps between her hair and arms.

Hm~, Mizuki also tilted her head slightly and tapped her index finger on her chin.

Her hair had a slight tendency to curl inwards and the shoulder-length tresses matched her head's swaying motion.

Swiftly after she did so, her head straightened.

"Since you are able to say that you'll be back to normal by tomorrow, I guess that's OK."

Her mood appeared to be headed in the direction that Erika was hoping for.

"Yeah, seriously…… Ah~, how annoying."

Originally, even Erika didn't believe that nonsense about returning to normal by tomorrow.

After coming to some sort of realization, Erika rose with a lethargic expression.

"In the end, we were probably only flirting with Tatsuya. We plainly never requested Tatsuya-kun to 'lend us a hand' and worked under the assumption that even if we didn't say anything, he would still chip in to help. So I was furious~ when I saw that he was also helping that woman and keeping a foot in either camp…… Damn it, I'm getting embarrassed again."

In between the gaps of the arms covering her face, a hint of a blush could be seen. Her embarrassment was not just restricted to her words.

Seeing this oddly adorable appearance, Mizuki sighed deeply.

"……What, that sigh of yours was like saying 'you amaze me from the bottom of my heart'."

"While I'm not sure if it's from the bottom of my heart, the first part is true."

Mizuki rolled her eyes in response to the sharp glance Erika sent her way from beneath her fingers.

The edge gradually disappeared from Erika's eyes.

Mizuki shifted herself so she was right in front of Erika (she just changed the orientation of her seat) before reaching out and plucked away the arms covering Erika's face.

"So in the end, you're just stubbornly stuck in a pit of self-loathing…… I think this sort of thing qualifies as a 'soliloquy'."

"Ouch! Mizuki mercilessly stabbed my chest with her words~."

"I'm being very serious."

"……I'm sorry."

Though there was no emotion behind those words, Erika's body seemed to shrink even more.

"To put it bluntly, Erika-chan, you can't rely on Tatsuya-kun to take the first step to approach."

"……Just like I thought?"

"I'm not certain if you're really in pursuit or not, but if all you do is hide, then he's really going to put you aside, right?

In the first place, Miyuki-san occupies everything in Tatsuya's head. Even if you don't make any overt gestures, if you don't at least make an effort to remain in his field of vision, then will he even remember you?"

"……That, is a definite possibility."

"I think I can safely say that the idea of Tatsuya actively paying that kind of attention to Erika is definitely false. I'm certain that you're actually missing out if you start off with that assumption."

"Yeah…… You have a point.

That guy has nerves of steel and calling him slow on the uptake would be too kind to him. With him as an opponent, being embarrassed won't get me anywhere."

Erika tightly clenched her fingers.

Seeing this, Mizuki revealed a warm, nurturing smile.

This was the scene that greeted Mikihiko when he walked in.

"Ah, so it's true that you guys didn't get anything."

As soon as he entered, Mikihiko uttered these words.

Before the two of them could ask "what are you talking about?", Mikihiko pulled out two sandwiches from the plastic bag in his hand.

"Here, Erika, this one has tuna, potato and carrots. Shibata-san wants the egg sandwich, correct?"

"Eh, how?"

"T-thank you."

"You're welcome."

That was in response to Mizuki's reply.

"No reason in particular.

If you don't eat anything, you'll still be hungry even if you did nothing but sleep, no?"

Afterwards, that reply was for Erika's question.

"Ho~…… Miki, you're becoming more observant."

"I would like to say you're welcome, but these are from Tatsuya.

Since you appear to be avoiding him, he had me bring them to you."

Hearing Mikihiko's words, Erika and Mizuki exchanged a glance.

"So he didn't forget……"

"Looks like you've not been put aside……"

Suddenly, Erika sprang up in a determined manner.

"W-what is it?"

Erika adopted a victorious posture before the wide-eyed Mizuki.

"If you have your own thoughts on the matter then so do I, Tatsuya-kun!

I will not resign myself to being treated like empty space!"

"You clearly fled when he was paying attention to you."

"Miki, did you say something?"

"Nope. I just said that you better eat quickly."

Mikihiko pulled out his own sandwich and replied back without sparing her another glance.

As expected of childhood friends. Even though he occasionally stepped on a landmine, he was still adept at handling Erika.

At any rate, Erika calmed down and took a seat. Immediately afterward, the three of them started eating their sandwiches.

"Ouch……!"

All of a sudden, Mizuki's face tightened as she quickly shut her eyes. Erika deftly caught the egg sandwich that fell from her fingers. However, since that was more reflex, both she and Mikihiko kept their eyes on Mizuki, who was in the throes of pain. Mizuki removed her glasses and pressed her hands to her eyes.

Broken groans slipped from her mouth.

"……What is…… This…… This sort of aura, I've never seen……"

Noticing that something was amiss, Mikihiko hurriedly pulled out a talisman and cast a barrier that blocked out spirits. Although it was against school rules to bring CADs onto campus, no one present gave a damn about that right now.

"This, 'demonic' presence……"

They weren't psions, but pushion waves. This was why Erika couldn't possibly know and Mikihiko was only aware after focusing himself.

Pure "demonic" waves permeated the barrier and came through.

Given its ability to penetrate the lens, it was not surprising that power of this strength was able to affect Mizuki's eyes.

"Shibata-san, put on your glasses."

However, with a barrier in place, the protective lens should be able to fend off the waves.

As Mikihiko suspected, Mizuki was able to adopt a relaxed posture after putting her glasses back on.

With that, they finally had a spare moment to contemplate what happened –

—Pale faced, Erika and Mikihiko exchanged a look.

"Don't tell me, the vampire is here at school?"

"How brave! Miki, where is it?"

Springing to her feet in a lively manner, Erika paid no heed to the clatter of her chair falling to the ground. She advanced on Mikihiko with a vibrant expression.

"Erika, relax."

Mikihiko also rose and used a calm tone to deliver a solemn response.

"First of all, we need our equipment. I don't feel secure with just talismans."

"……That's true. Mizuki, wait here in the classroom."

"I'm going too."

Erika made the obvious request, but Mizuki shook her head.

"Mizuki?"

"I have a feeling that I'll be better off if I go. As for a reason…… I'm not really sure."

Her tone remained gentle, but contained a mettle that could not be dissuaded.

"……Understood. However, please don't leave my side."

"Miki?"

Erika's eyes widened at Mikihiko's unexpected words.

Still, his words were the product of careful thought instead of being purely circumstantial.

"One person alone would be easy prey, whereas a group can handle attacks more easily.

In addition, Shibata-san's eyes should prove a major asset."

"Ha…… Miki, then you shall bear the responsibility of protecting Mizuki."

Any more words on this subject would just be a waste of time, so Erika started walking towards the office where CADs were held. Mikihiko was one step behind her. Both he and Mizuki knew that this wasn't the time and place for any teenage romantic scenes. Nonetheless, in order to make sure Mizuki wasn't left behind, there was nothing he could do except make sure he held her hand in his – that was how Mikihiko persuaded himself.

◊ ◊ ◊

Lieutenant Silvia, call sign "Mercury One", served as Major Angelina Sirius's support during her mission to Japan. That being said, taking care of Lina was not listed among Silvia's duties.

The members of Stars were categorized into 1st Class Planets, 2nd Class Planets, Constellations, Comets, and Satellites. Among them, 1st and 2nd Class Planets as well as Constellations were treated as frontline fighting troops, whereas Comets and Satellites typically filled the role of auxiliaries or undercover agents. Of course, that was just how the roles were divvied up on paper since Lina was given an undercover mission despite her status as a 1st Class Planet.

As a "1st Class" member of Comet "Mercury", Silvia's duties typically resided in supporting from the rear, such as utilizing magic to gather and analyze data. For this mission, her data analysis abilities were highly prized among her compatriots and, unlike the embassy, she was specifically preparing to secretly analyze the psion wave signature.

Her current task revolved around identifying the masked individual who gave Lina the slip after their fight. In order to verify whether another shared a similar psion wave signature with their target, she was singlehandedly pouring over all relevant information regarding people affiliated with the USNA military and government.

As a core component of CADs, the sensory stone possessed the function to translate psion signals into electric signals. Furthermore, regardless of whether it was a Magician, trace psions would still be released even if they weren't doing anything. After the sensory stone had finished translating the psion signal into an electric one, the pattern could be recorded electronically and broadcasted on a projector. However, when compared with the flat image on the projector, there might still be a few minute differences when trying to convert the image back into a psion wave signature within a short period of time. This was why a Magician trained in psion wave signature identification was deployed to this task instead of delegating it to someone who was not a Magician.

In the end, it was practically impossible to gather data for all the USNA military and government officials, but pretty much every Magician was included within. Also, individuals who were not Magicians but still under the Stars' umbrella were also included. Silently praying that she wouldn't find a match within this group, Silvia continued her examination.

First, she verified that no one within Stars had this psion wave signature. Anyone from other frontline forces not affiliated with Stars that bore similarities all had alibis. Shortly after noon, Silvia discovered something worthy of note around lunch time.

(Huh? This can't be……)

◊ ◊ ◊

As Lina dined with her classmates from Class A – and not with Miyuki's group, she was struggling with what she should do afterwards. Lunch break only lasted one hour, and there were only 30 minutes left. They will probably be finished with their meal in five minutes. Normally, they would find another place for tea or pop into the Student Council as a part-time member, but today–

(……Maybe I should go see Mia.)

She was Lina's neighbor and, on some level, a comrade as well. Today, Michaela Honda, or "Mia" for short, was visiting First High under the guise of a salesperson from Maximilian Devices. Preoccupied as she was with pursuing the deserters, Lina hadn't seen Mia in the past couple of days. Although she didn't have any reason in particular, this was still an excellent opportunity to catch up.

While her brain was ruminating on this, Lina's hand motions and expression never revealed what was on her mind as she continued to converse naturally with her peers until the last empty plate had been removed.

(This is!?)

Lina instinctively wanted to stand up, but she immediately caught herself just as she lifted her waist. Fortunately, her classmates assumed that she was correcting her posture and paid her no heed. Lina put on a polite smile and furiously clamped down on the agitation running through her mind.

Just then, an alien wave surged outward. Seeing as how her peers around seemed oblivious to the matter, it probably wasn't a magical aura but a pushion wave instead. Lina only noticed because she came into contact with this multiple times recently in combat. This was the presence of the masked individual, the "vampire". She also had a rough grasp on its direction. It was coming from beyond the door where the workers were coming out of.

(That's right, Mia!)

The moment she thought of the location, everything she was considering floated across Lina's mind. Right now was precisely the time Mia was visiting First High. As a member of the transportation crew, she must have received access to those doors.

"—Sorry, I just remembered that I have something to attend to. I'll catch you guys later."

Lina politely excused herself from her peers and rose from the table.

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(It turned out to be an Illusionary Contact Formation…… Looks like it was a mistake to rate them too lightly as a normal high school.)

A wordless voice came from the Maximilian Device's trailer. The rebounding pushion wave was like the flapping of a bee's wings, a noise that could not be heard with human ears. This was the "sound" formed from the collective consciousness of the vampires. Within this "voice", 70% was in the affirmative and 30% was in dissent. The jumbled and disparate voices could not be separated so easily.

(Do you think they noticed?)

The formation spread out along the wall and doorway. There was only a momentary disruption between the hidden pushion wave and the disguised psion waves. There were only a few Magicians who could identify pushion waves and, setting that aside for the moment, their psion wave signatures were just like human beings.

Within the trailer, the vampire's body sprouted a new question that was answered by the pushion waves from within her. If a third party capable of detecting these thoughts was present, then the observed individual would seem like they were talking to themselves. This time, the response was 90% dissenting – their belief was that they had not been detected.

(I think so too…… Still, we shouldn't have come here.)

In order to maintain appearances, her disguise that allowed her to brazenly access First High was truly an excellent opportunity. Still, when taking her true objectives into account, walking into First High's campus filled with sensory devices and Counter Magic carried unnecessary risk. Her outer appearance did not allow her to refuse this task, but she might have been better off avoiding this place even if she had to abandon her outer persona...... Unease began mounting around her.

◊ ◊ ◊

After lunch, Tatsuya arrived on the school rooftop.

Owing to Erika's sour mood today, it turned out to be Tatsuya, Miyuki, and Honoka taking lunch together.

From a certain perspective, he appeared to be in a situation where he had a flower on each arm. Scratch that, he was precisely in that situation. After all, neither Miyuki nor Honoka bothered to hide their attraction. It wasn't that they weren't planning on hiding it, but more like they never intended to do so from the very beginning.

There was nothing he could do about it, but even someone with Tatsuya's heart would feel a little uneasy at the furtive glances sent his way. Owing to this, he elected to flee from the cafeteria.

The rooftops of First High's campus bore some semblance to an aerial garden, complete with fashionable benches, and were a highly popular site at school.

Still, given the high tide of winter, few braved the biting chill of the outdoors to come up here.

Today was fairly humid, but as temperatures go, it was overly chilly. In spite of this, they were the only three on the roof. Someone might point out that magic could be used to combat the cold, but except for a token minority on campus, most people were forbidden from carrying CADs. Furthermore, no one was foolish enough to "use magic without a CAD" simply to safeguard a location during lunch break. Regardless, the three of them belonged to that token minority. Currently, Miyuki employed magic to block the chill and allowed the three of them to enjoy a comfortable moment.

Once again for emphasis, Miyuki's magic operated while covering all three of them. Miyuki's magic condenses oxygen to create cold air. Even if she reversed the direction, a trivial task like keeping the cold that hadn't even reached freezing point outside was a piece of cake for her.

In other words, there was no way it could be cold.

Even so, Honoka had her arms tightly wrapped around Tatsuya's arm so that not even a gap could be found.

The instant Honoka made her move(?), Miyuki gave a startled look – though it was more like a chilly gaze of her own, but now she also took hold of Tatsuya's other arm as if to contest Honoka's claim.

Thanks to this, Tatsuya was now completely immobile, as if both of his arms had been tied down.

Now Tatsuya would be simply adorable if he blushed slightly here, but even with both sides pinned down by breasts of significant curvature, Tatsuya still wore his customary wry smile that seemed to say "what can I do". Many were the male students who believed that no one in his position could complain even if they were stabbed in the back right then and there.

Likewise, Miyuki and Honoka lapsed into silence for some unknown reason. Upon closer examination, the two of them were blushing to the tips of their ears. Since it wasn't because of the temperature, then that must be the reason, so wouldn't they be better off letting go of their hands, Tatsuya thought. –With that line of thinking, even if he dodged the insensitive label, there was no way he could avoid the accusation of being oblivious to a woman's heart.

Nonetheless, even if the situation had turned into this, Tatsuya wasn't going to dwell on the matter forever. Since the two of them were no longer speaking, Tatsuya started to organize the data regarding the current incident in his head.

Initially, he thought that the "vampires" were attacking humans with some goal in mind. Based on the current situation, the only known information was that they attacked humans with high magical properties and took away blood and spiritual energy.

Why were they attacking Magicians?

And what was the point in taking blood?

In the end, why did they arrive in Japan after fleeing the USNA military? Did they have to remain in Japan to accomplish some objective, or was there a third party forcing them to do something here.

Unable to find an angle to tackle these questions, he somehow shifted to the true identity of the "vampires."

(Based on the identification system of the Ancient Magic practitioners, we should be correct in that the real identity of the "vampire" is actually a "Parasite".)

(According to sensei's hypothesis, there is a good chance that Parasites are formed from the independent information bodies splintered off from the human psyche.)

(Shizuku's information on the USNA's miniature black hole experiment being the catalyst also seems trustworthy.)

(In that case, this incident was caused by information bodies invading from an alternate dimension…… Was my theory spot on?)

(The problem is the connection, or lack thereof, between the information bodies invading from another dimension and the information bodies formed by the activity of the human psyche.)

(The bottom line is, where is the true form of the "psyche"? Another dimension? A higher dimension? Or even "nowhere"?)

(In that case, then where is the Idea? The Eidos?)

Noticing that he was drifting into a cognitive dead end, Tatsuya slightly shook his head and tried to reorganize his thoughts.

(There are two possibilities.)

(First, Parasites invaded from an alternate dimension.)

(Second, uncontrolled energy trickled in from another dimension and stimulated the previously dormant Parasites that dwelt in this world.)

(Lastly, so long as the Parasite – well, given our lack of knowledge on the real identity of the independent information body derived from the activity of the human psyche, this is about as far as we can go, eh.)

(Given that premise, what I should be considering is how to discover and deconstruct it.)

(If the information body came from the psyche, there is a high chance that its composition is made up of pushions.)

(So considering my capabilities, there are still enemies that I cannot decompose even if I can perceive them, eh……)

His train of thought was derailed by Miyuki's unexpected movement.

"Miyuki, what's wrong?"

Her earlier action was not because she couldn't hold it back any longer, but an involuntary act of uncomfortableness.

Hearing Tatsuya's voice, Honoka noticed that this wasn't because he was coddling Miyuki and also separated herself from her previously snug position at Tatsuya's side. Immediately, her body started shaking because the magic that held back the chill had dissipated.

"Ah, I'm terribly sorry."

Miyuki used her empty hand to quickly manipulate the CAD.

The cold air fled at once.

However, Miyuki's expression remained listless.

"No, compared to this, what happened?"

Tatsuya's actions betrayed no hint that he was affected by the cold.

With his Self-Restoration Magic coupled with literal training from hell, Tatsuya had no reason to put on a brave front in the face of the chill. Compared to this, he was more concerned about his sister's odd behavior.

"……There seems to be the feeling of some sort of uncomfortable wave brushing over the skin…… No, that's probably my imagination."

Miyuki apologetically shook her head as if she was feeling guilty about disrupting Tatsuya during his down time. Still, Tatsuya did not move to accept Miyuki's apology.

"Uncomfortable wave? Was it a psion wave or a pushion wave?"

Coincidentally matching up with his earlier contemplation, Tatsuya couldn't simply write it off as a misinterpretation. Nevertheless, this question was rather pointless.

"I do not know…… Yet, seeing as how Onii-sama didn't notice, I guess it should be pushions?"

So long as it was a psion wave, it was impossible to escape Tatsuya's detection.

Completely overturned. While that thought ran across Tatsuya's mind, he immediately made the connection that this wasn't the time to think of such leisurely thoughts. There was a mountain of classified secrets kept in the terminals of a magic high school that was directly affiliated with the national magic universities, so from a protection standpoint, safeguards on par with the magic universities were required and had been implemented. Countermeasures for suspicious individuals, hidden recordings or eavesdropping aside, there were also serious countermeasures in place for magic.

A sudden burst of pushion waves hinted that someone might have tripped the countermeasures. The government agencies would definitely step in if this place was usually inundated with magic waves that triggered discomfort. Given that this feeling was largely unnoticed, the owner of this wave possessed the power to rein in their pushion waves.

Just being uncomfortable alone wasn't sufficient grounds to determine that the owner was a harmful individual, but there were even fewer explanations for an optimistic outcome. That didn't need to be said given the situation at hand. Among their possible opponents who could cause Miyuki to feel discomfited, there was a high chance that they were up against the "vampire".

Just as he was ruminating over how to uncover the source of that pushion wave and what was the best method to approach that hurdle, his information terminal beeped. This was the sound of an incoming call. Tatsuya moved the receiver to his ear.

"Tatsuya-kun, it's terrible!"

Before he could say anything, this phrase burst forth from the receiver. Even if nothing critical was happening, a more timid individual – assuming they didn't "fall over" just after the word "terrible" – might have flown into a panic. Under normal circumstances, one might think that declaring a name should come first, but this wasn't the time and place. Likewise, this was an excellent opportunity for Tatsuya to chime in.

"Saegusa-senpai, do you know the precise location?"

The transmitter fired into the vampire's body last time had not expired yet. So long as the invading creature was the same vampire as last time, they should be able to use the campus's Local Positioning System (LSP) to lock on to the target's current position. As the previous Student Council President, Mayumi should know the password to the LSP control mechanism (of course, this was a blatant violation of her duties as the Student Council President).

"The vampire is on campus – Ah, this will be much easier if you already understand. The earlier signal is progressing from the side door towards the staff's loading dock for the Practical Skills classes. Today, there should be employees from Maximilian Devices scheduled to demonstrate the new examination equipment."

(In other words, they have infiltrated that group.)

Despite being pertinent to his earlier considerations, Tatsuya set aside questions like why the vampire chose this moment to appear or what their goals were and swiftly stood up.

Immediately afterwards, he activated the Flying-Type Magic device at his waist and jumped over the railing.

Miyuki quickly followed suit with her own Flying-Type Magic.

Lacking a personal Flying-Type Magic device, Honoka was left behind on the rooftop.

◊ ◊ ◊

Besides members of the Student Council and select members from the Public Moral Committee, students were forbidden from carrying CADs on campus.

To compensate, students left their CADs in storage and removed them after school.

It was fairly difficult to remove the CADs from storage when school wasn't out. During the incident in spring, anyone with eyes could tell that it was an emergency, so special exceptions were made for CAD removal. Unfortunately, only a tiny proportion of the students and faculty detected the anomaly today. Regrettably, the staff at the storage room was not included, so Erika and Mikihiko's requests were denied.

—If they were the only people there, that is.

"Yoshida-kun, how…… Ah, you guys also noticed."

Katsuto arrived while Erika was arguing with the staff.

"Juumonji-senpai."

No matter how much Erika danced to her own tune, there was no way she could ignore Katsuto. Unrelated to their positions as underclass or upperclassman, this was because of the difference between their skills and status.

Erika retracted her body but left her hands on the counter while Katsuto slightly leaned forward. Just by this alone, the employees – the school staff on duty had already been overwhelmed by a student's presence.

"There's been an emergency, I wish to retrieve my CAD."

In reality, the Club Activities Group had also been unofficially awarded the right to carry CADs, but Katsuto politely observed the rules after relinquishing his position to Hattori.

"B-But, it's not the scheduled time yet……"

"It's an emergency."

Even so, he seemed like someone who wasn't going to be bound by the rules. Faced with a female employee earnestly trying to uphold her duty, Katsuto once more applied pressure. Finally, a fine adult piteously caved and lost all color to her face.

"Leaving it alone may result in serious consequences. Please return my CAD."

"……Please wait a moment."

Chiding the employee as "weak" would be rather inappropriate. If not for an equally ferocious character, there was no way to stand against Katsuto's will.

"These two are my assistants."

"……I understand."

Still, that posture was truly pitiful.

◊ ◊ ◊

After running here with her heart in her throat, Lina hurried after Michaela's trailer after it came into sight. Originally, she was highly resistant to the idea of her acquaintances catching her in a high school uniform. It was one thing for someone to just see her wearing the uniform, but she would be incredibly embarrassed if someone caught her in an actual high school setting with a uniform on. Lina's given mission was to infiltrate as a high school student. Thanks to her other mission hunting down the inhuman deserters, her intelligence work was currently on hold. In addition, her true identity had been uncovered by the targets of her investigation, Tatsuya and Miyuki. One thing that worried Lina to no end was whether she still had to disguise herself as a high school student.

Yet, even with Tatsuya and Miyuki in the know about her identity, her peers and professors seemed to be oblivious on the matter. It appeared that Tatsuya and Miyuki had no intention of revealing the true face of "Sirius". As to what they were planning, Lina had no idea. Under the situation where she had no way of preventing the two of them from revealing the secret, keeping the details under wraps was the best possible choice for her.

Right now was the time she had to make sure she avoided any suspicious behavior that was out of line with high school students.

Thus, Lina struggled with herself regarding whether she should visit Michaela at the trailer for Maximilian Devices.

Still, simply reminding Michaela was not even a choice in Lina's mind. Though this might be somewhat naïve, she was unable to ignore her duty towards her comrades. Caught between her duties towards her comrades and her mission, Lina was stuck between a rock and a hard place. She had adopted an attitude that avoided enemy detection, but had neglected to be wary of her surroundings.

Even if she could see Michaela descending from the trailer at a distance, Lina didn't feel anything in particular as she sighed.

◊ ◊ ◊

While it was a specified location, Tatsuya and Miyuki hardly descended from the sky with a violent roar. There was no doubt that the vampire responsible for causing a ruckus in the capital had invaded the school, but in reality, there didn't seem to be much chaos. The target must be under observation since triggering the security alarms, and employees from Maximilian Devices would follow legitimate channels to enter the school. Reckless actions were forbidden without a valid excuse.

Neither was continuous observation a good tactic for Tatsuya. This was also the first time that Tatsuya was up against a magical creature and not a Magician.

Haphazardly initiating combat contained the possibility of revealing classified spells and techniques. Just imagining the cover up and gag orders alone was causing him to feel downtrodden.

At the very least, things would be facilitated if they knew who was the "vampire" infested by the Parasite. Maximilian Devices operated in teams of six employees. If they moved together as a group, there was no way to identify which one emitted the signal. Even so, causing all of them and any additional witnesses to disappear – in this case, it would be more like "eradicate" – was also out of the question. Hidden in an empty classroom in the science wing, Tatsuya and his sister kept a close eye on the mobile lab near the docking area (the modified trailer used for storage).

"Lina?"

Involuntarily, Miyuki said this aloud. Before his sister spoke, Tatsuya was already aware of Lina's presence tailing the trailer, but now he renewed his attention on the blonde transfer student.

Today, the day after yesterday – their "duel" occurred near midnight, so anything before dawn was considered to be yesterday – yet here she was attending school like nothing had happened. Special forces from large countries were expected to be made of sterner stuff, but here she was also making careless moves unbefitting her status.

There was no sign that this was a premeditated action. Her focus was too lax, to the point that she failed to detect their eyes on her. She gave off the impression that she was in the throes of indecision.

Tatsuya kept an eye on her without any specific reason just as a woman wearing a suit walked towards Lina from her previous position near the trailer.

Based on Lina's lip movements, she appeared to have said the name "Mia." Tatsuya assumed that this woman must be the USNA agent sent to infiltrate Maximilian Devices.

Based on yesterday's interrogation, Lina said she was hunting for vampires. This wasn't for appearances' sake, she actually faced off against them. Yet at the same time, she also said that while they were aware that the deserters fled to Japan, they were unaware of their actual identities. There was a high chance that a vampire was disguised as one of their agents, making their identities that much harder to identify.

(Hard to imagine that someone like Sirius of Stars would be unable to identify her target even after repeated head-on confrontations with her target……)

As he thought this, Tatsuya risked using his "sight" to sweep over that woman.

Immediately afterwards, he felt it. Within his amplified senses, there were traces of another observer searching around.

A massive amount of "spirits" danced around that woman's surroundings.

◊ ◊ ◊

In regards to Angelina Sirius's unexpected request for contact on First High's campus, Michaela Honda felt a surge of confusion and anxiety. Although they shared the same mission in identifying the mysterious Strategic-Class Magician, Lina and Michaela belonged to different command structures. Lina was her superior in terms of rank, but it was hard to imagine her giving Michaela any sort of order. In this regard, Lina was a little of a purist. Putting it lightly, she wasn't contaminated by society, and putting it negatively, she was simply stubborn. That being said, Michaela had no idea what Lina would request her help for. Lina was the High Commander of Stars whereas Michaela was simply a technician.

Even so, there was no way she could ignore her direct superior. Doing so would have been practically screaming she was suspicious. Michaela stepped off the trailer and earnestly tried to assume an air of normality as she walked towards Lina.

Towards the spirits that kept hounding her, she waved her hands like someone trying to fend off a pest.

◊ ◊ ◊

The sight of the female technician attempting to avoid the spirits that would be invisible to your average Magician solidified Mikihiko's belief that she was the one.

"It's definitely her. There's no way it could be wrong."

Hearing Mikihiko's muffled voice, Katsuto wordlessly nodded.

"That's Lina, I think. So…… She's the leader."

Her whispers barely containing her fury, Erika already held her equipment in the shape of a wakazashi.

Although Tatsuya and Miyuki knew this was a misunderstanding, it was perfectly natural for her to make this assumption.

"There's a barrier in place that blocks sight and hearing, but they can't lie to machines……"

"In that case, let me do something."

Mikihiko and Katsuto exchanged nods. Behind Mikihiko, Mizuki was completely unable to hide her dismayed expression and shuddered.

"Erika, not yet."

"I got it."

It was true that she was a little distracted, but she still kept her calm while replying. Upon hearing this, Mikihiko threw the talisman he held in his hand. Six strips of paper arrayed in the shape of a fan slid over the ground at a low altitude. The talisman landed after forming a perfect hexagon around the trailer.

"I'm starting."

Unlike the theories behind modern magic, the magic he invoked was a wide area magic that inhibited the senses.

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"Mia…… What's wrong?"

Seeing Michaela wave her arms as if she was shooing insects, Lina tilted her head in bemusement.

There would be no confusion if this was still summer. Nor would it be odd in spring or fall, but this was the heart of winter. Without any hint of warmth, the temperature was bone chilling. Indoors was one thing, but there should be no way that any pests would be flying outdoors.

"No, it's nothing."

Just hearing the voice alone might mean exactly that without any ulterior meaning. Yet, her expression blatantly faltered and, depending on the time and place, that would have been a grievous misstep. That was what Lina believed.

Lina also believed that exactly what the mistake Michaela made wasn't important at this point in time.

Still, she was now forced to indicate to Michaela that they had to leave this place. Although Lina's instincts screamed at her to verify the source of Michaela's wavering, logic demanded that she first ensure Michaela safely escaped the vampire's threat.

This indecision weighed down Lina's actions. Fortunately(?), there was no longer any need for her to wrestle with this any longer.

"—What's this? We're surrounded!?"

The fact that they were encompassed within a wide area magic for sensory inhibition immediately drew Lina's attention.

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"Is that a barrier!?"

Even Miyuki was shocked that the large trailer she was watching suddenly disappeared from view. Seeing his sister turn her head towards him in question, Tatsuya nodded in the affirmative.

"Must be Mikihiko. Quite an impressive technique, actually."

"Yoshida-kun?"

Unrelated to Course 1 or 2 students, Miyuki was unable to hide her surprise that a first year high school student could devise such a complicated and powerful formation that befuddled the senses.

"Its effects lie in cutting off sight and hearing.

Looks like it can't affect physical movement though……"

He was slightly uneasy at leaving Miyuki in the dark about the proceedings ahead of time, but he couldn't afford to waste the painstaking effort involved in creating this stage. Tatsuya temporarily reestablished connection with the line that previously lay dormant.

"Saegusa-senpai, this is Shiba."

"What is it?"

The response was immediate. She must have remained on the line the entire time.

"Please turn off the recording devices near the docking area leading towards the practical skills building."

This would have been an outrageous request even for the daughter of the Saegusa Family if these were the streets, but within the confines of the school, then on some level Mayumi was still able to manipulate everything as she saw fit.

"Why...... Even if I asked, you probably wouldn't answer me anyways."

"Please."

"Ha…… OK, it's off."

If one thought about it for a moment, Mayumi actually coddled Tatsuya very much.

Then again, Tatsuya pampered Mayumi as well, so this was more like "tit for tat", or maybe "mutually beneficial".

"Let's go, Miyuki."

"Yes, Onii-sama."

After exchanging a glance, Tatsuya and Miyuki flew out of the classroom window from where they were hiding.

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Instinct alone enabled her to avoid the white blade that flashed before her eyes.

Pushing Mia aside, Lina used that push off to flip backwards herself. Though covered in dust, she still pulled out the old information terminal from her inside pocket. As she slid to her side, Lina opened the terminal. A flat, Generalized CAD appeared from within. Erika never hesitated – it was perfectly natural for infiltrators to be equipped with outlandish equipment for surprise attacks.

Without sparing Lina a glance, Erika sprinted towards the fallen Mia and pointed the sharp end of the wakazashi at her while holding it in one hand.

"What are you doing, Erika!?"

Lina activated magic that was designed to blow Erika away.

That magic encountered a counter magic barrier erected against it – and was blocked from phenomenon alteration.

"Katsuto Juumonji!?"

The solemn giant appeared before her when she whipped her head around in shock. Though his physical stature wasn't overly outrageous to her, his very presence seemed to tower over her.

Intelligence had identified his strength as something to be wary of ahead of time. Still, after encountering him in the flesh, it was hard not to be awed by the fact that someone of his caliber was lurking around her. During the instant that Lina's attention was drawn to Katsuto, Erika had already made that final step.

"Mia!?"

The desperate cry that bemoaned her comrade's fate was swiftly replaced by the astonishment one feels when witnessing an unbelievable sight.

Mia had caught the blade of the wakazashi barehanded. Without using any CAD, her palm was wrapped in barrier magic.

She had seen that magic before. This was the same magic that the mysterious individual in the white mask employed.

"What is going on here……?"

"Lina, can you hear me!?"

"Silvie?"

"Thank goodness! I finally got through."

This wasn't a conversation held over a communication device. Instead, this was a type of magic that Silvia excelled in. Without using the physical body as a medium, she used aerial vibration to convey her voice. So long as she could lock onto the target, she could ignore any physical obstacle and communicate without transmitters or recording devices no matter how great the distance.

Strictly speaking, it was more efficient as a method of listening in, but even on its own merit as a transmission tool, signals could be passed along through aerial vibration in the ears without worrying about someone listening in. While there was no hope of listening in private, the magic's practicality cannot be denied given the lack of time to converse over a receiver.

"I have uncovered the identity of the individual wearing the white mask from earlier."

Even with Michaela and Erika keeping each other at bay during their stalemate, Lina's consciousness was still drawn away by Silvia's voice.

"It's Michaela! The masked individual's true identity is Michaela Honda!"

Lina's mind went blank, if only for an instant.

"—Mia, so you were the one in the white mask!"

For Lina, Michaela was simply a teammate. She just so happened to be someone who roomed next to her and occasionally spoke with her over tea.

Even so, the fact that Michaela was the one who had repeatedly clashed against her struck Lina a heavy blow.

Still in a standoff with Erika, Michaela glanced at Lina, who wore a rather human expression. Yet, this was no look of protested innocence or regret, but a cold, inhuman gaze of someone warily regarding an enemy.

"No need to waste your breath at this point!"

Erika was of the belief that the vampire and Lina were in cahoots. She wholly ignored what she imagined to be Lina's feigned shouts of dismay and swung her wakazashi at the openings in Michaela's defense. When she closed in to one step away from her opponent, the horizontal swing

Erika directed towards Michaela's neck level magically changed direction to avoid Michaela's blocking arm and stabbed towards Michaela's chest.

Astounded by this turn around, Michaela could only wear this expression as she looked down towards her chest.

On some level, this was the expected result.

Despite receiving training in close quarters combat, Erika was still a Magician.

While he received martial arts training, Mikihiko was still a magic practitioner.

In addition to her magical education, Erika was at heart a swordswoman. In the domain of the sword, when wielding blades or fists in combat, Erika's skills were several levels higher than the Magicians that Michaela had been facing against up until this moment.

Yet, in the next instant, it was Erika who wore a grim expression. Heedless of the skirt she wore, Erika raised a leg to kick out at Michaela's waist. She used this push off to extract her wakazashi and leaped backwards to a safe position.

Michaela slashed with her right arm to dispel Erika's afterimage. Her fingers curled like talons with a pyramid-like force field around them. Before Erika and Lina's eyes, the puncture hole in her chest swiftly recovered.

"Healing Magic!? She can heal that degree of injury instantaneously!?"

"Looks like we're up against a real monster."

In the face of Lina's dismayed shout, Erika spat out her own response while keeping her eyes glued onto Michaela.

"Then, how about this?"

The voice emanated from the trailer's shadows.

Accompanied by that voice, the chill of the wintry air sharpened. With perfect precision, the frost roared towards Michaela.

Michaela was completely frozen without any time to muster a physical or magical response.

"Miyuki?"

This astounding sight prompted Erika to relax both her stance and tone. The figure who appeared before her was unquestionably Miyuki, with Tatsuya materializing behind her.

"What's going on!? Lina, are you OK!?"

"I'm fine now, but please dispatch any special forces currently on standby. We may have to force our way out."

"—Understood. I'll make the arrangements."

In response to the agitated queries from Silvia regarding her safety, Lina quietly replied back with her orders.

Just as Lina and Silvia were conversing, Tatsuya walked before Lina.

"Offline."

Lina swiftly said one word and immediately broke off her connection with Silvia. Though this might be meaningless, it was still an effort to hide her trump card. Tatsuya should have witnessed what Lina said, but he never bothered to raise that subject.

"Lina, she appears to be someone you're familiar with, but I will be taking over custody."

Tatsuya said as he walked towards her former neighbor who had been turned into an ice statue.

"You…… killed the people from Maximilian Devices?"

Hearing Lina's question, Tatsuya formed an expression that was just short of a grimace.

"No need to assume the worst. I only let them sleep for a little bit."

The employees from Maximilian Devices weren't conspirators, given that they were oblivious to Michaela's true nature. They were simply normal people caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. While a situation where they created a ruckus might create a beneficial opportunity for Lina, she was honestly glad that they would be spared any additional hazard.

"Just a second here. I'm going to be in a little bit of a bind if you just cart her off."

In place of Lina, who could only reluctantly back down given her limited options, Erika looked to contest the spoils of war.

"Though this might seem silly in Tatsuya-kun's eyes, we have our own reputation to consider. If that woman is truly the one who hurt Leo, then I can't hand her over even if it's you, Tatsuya-kun."

While not overly belligerent, there wasn't a single bit of wasted effort in the way she held that wakazashi. This was an obvious hint that she could immediately resort to a combat situation with minimal effort.

Rather, there was no need to scrutinize so carefully, as her eyes told the whole story.

Erika was 100% serious here.

"I'm not necessarily going to press custody either."

Regardless, this was a misunderstanding of epic proportions.

"Eh?"

As expected, Erika adopted a bewildered expression as if she had been faked out by Tatsuya's response.

"Weren't you going to investigate that woman and dispose of her?"

Lina worried her lip at the words "dispose of". She had no right to speak here and her expression clearly showed that she was trying to convince herself of that.

"All we want is the result of the investigation."

Tatsuya never bothered with Lina's expression. His eyes were focused on keeping Erika and Katsuto in his line of sight.

"I will contact my side for that."

In response to Katsuto's reply, Tatsuya nodded in assent.

Tatsuya glanced at Katsuto and Erika,

Miyuki watched Tatsuya and Erika,

Katsuto kept his eyes on Tatsuya and Lina,

Erika was eyeing Tatsuya and Miyuki.

Only Mikihiko was observing the entire scene, so of course he was the first one to detect the anomaly.

"Watch out!"

The hurriedly issued warning was kept short due to the pressing nature of the situation. In spite of this, the warning still achieved the desired effect. Katsuto cast a barrier to block the electricity being generated by the Dispersal System in midair while Tatsuya employed Counter Magic to dispel it.

Miyuki and Erika both whipped their heads towards the caster who released the magic.

As the two of them stood there in bemusement, the woman responsible for releasing the magic remained frozen. A human being of flesh and blood, no, even nonhumans would have found it impossible to cling onto their consciousness – that, was public knowledge.

Yet here, all of this was overturned. The ice statue was covered in electricity.

"Self-destruct!?"

Lina was the one who released that mournful groan.

"Everyone down!"

Katsuto and Tatsuya called out at the same time. Tatsuya covered Miyuki while Mikihiko threw his arms around Mizuki. Katsuto, Erika, and Lina all crouched down in defensive positions.

Bursting through Miyuki's ice, Michaela's body was wrapped in flames. Like a paper held before the flame, they were immediately extinguished.

Afterwards – the dancing ashes dissipated before magic shot towards Tatsuya, Miyuki, Lina, Erika, and Katsuto from previously empty locations.

Right now, the wintry sky might be covered in dark clouds that heralded the coming of snow at any moment. However, the thunderbolts from the rain were not coming from the clouds, but from seemingly random locations. This was not lightning, given that its speed was far short of tens of thousands of meters per second and was well within the visible spectrum. At most, this was about the speed of an arrow shot from a bow.

Still, even an electrical ball of this size was sufficient to render all movement impossible. Taking ten shots from these at the same time would definitely result in death.

Furthermore, even if the speed was slow enough for the eye to follow, there was no time to erect defensive barriers when fired at a distance within ten meters. The reason they could block the first attack was because there were still traces remaining of the barrier created to block what they had mistakenly assumed to be a suicide attack. If this attack had been launched out of the blue, there was no way they could have all escaped unscathed. In addition, the danger was still present.

Before Miyuki could turn her head, Tatsuya had already used magic to erase the flash that suddenly appeared behind her back.

The electric ball gathered over Erika's head was dispersed by the charged ice particles Miyuki created.

Katsuto blocked the flash while Lina's plasma neutralized the current.

There was no trace that an Activation Sequence was involved. Regardless of whether it was the electric ball or force that applied the rotational motion, both were phenomenon alterations that resulted from Magic Sequences forged by psions.

By using the phenomenon alterations in the air that caused electrons to converge as a premonition, they barely managed to hold out against the attacks that could appear from anywhere.

Again, there was no sign of a Magician. At the very least, they weren't within Tatsuya's "vision". Given that they could elude Tatsuya's "vision", their opponent was no Magician.

(So this is a Parasite!)

Magic was something released from the pushions floating in the Idea's seas.

Mikihiko and Mizuki were sequestered a little further away from the other five in the shadows of the trailer.

The flashes in the sky dissipated in front of Tatsuya and his companions. This was what Mizuki beheld with her eyes, since she was unable to see the magical harbingers and fallout. All of the magical shockwaves were being cut off by the barrier. Based on her earlier experience, Mikihiko arrived at the conclusion that this was absolutely necessary for Mizuki. Thanks to this, the two of them were able to avoid the lightning strikes. After abandoning the confines of flesh, the information body appeared to be unable to perceive light and sound, thus forced to use magic waves to feel out the world.

Their friends' predicament was not as fortuitous. The Parasite's attack was scattered because of its inclination to launch surprise attacks. Tatsuya's group was not being overwhelmed, but neither were they able to retaliate since they had no idea where the next attack was coming from. The monster's attacks failed to tell on Tatsuya and company, nor could they land a decisive strike on their opponent.

"How strange…… Why hasn't it fled yet……?"

Mizuki's ears caught wind of Mikihiko's words.

Upon hearing this, she suddenly started paying attention to details that hitherto escaped her grasp.

As to why the vampire – or Parasite, repeatedly used ineffective attacks.

While there was no way to ascertain if the Parasite possessed a will or judgment, assuming this was their innate nature or mechanical reflex, then there must be some sort of reason forcing them to keep up this obstinate assault.

Exactly why is that?

This question kept floating around in Mizuki's mind.

Before the phenomenon alteration could occur, Tatsuya had already broken down the Magic Sequence devised by the Parasite.

Maybe it was because there was no replacement, but in the beginning he had not been able to grasp the key components of the Activation Sequence deployment. Now, Tatsuya was able to perfectly intercept the Parasite's magic attacks.

After obtaining the necessary opening to launch a counterattack, his mind also found the leisure to begin analyzing the conundrum at the same time.

"Shiba, what do you think the reason is?"

It was the same for Katsuto.

Right now, with Miyuki, Erika, and Lina in tow, Katsuto and Tatsuya were arrayed in a formation where everyone had their backs to one another. Though they were unable to see each other's faces, this was not going to disrupt their ability to understand each other's questions.

"I'm not certain if this is its intent or innate ability, but there must be some reason why we must be kept here."

"So it could flee whenever it wants to."

"At the very least, I have no way of restraining it."

"Likewise. In the end, we don't even know where it is."

Katsuto was pretty much in the same boat as Tatsuya. Even if their perception through the Idea told them the target was right there, they had no idea how to handle it in the physical world. There was no clearly defined target in the material world. There was a very fragile connection to any physical existence, which gave the impression that there was only a frail thread that barely maintained the connection in order to invoke magic.

In addition, their opponent was a quantum information body. Tatsuya couldn't break down its design even if he could identify the target, which left Tatsuya with no viable means of attack.

"Lina, do you know anything?"

As he said this, Tatsuya turned and pointed his CAD at Erika before pulling the trigger. By her side, the magic harbinger dissipated like mist.

"……The true form of the vampire is a nonphysical entity known as a Parasite."

She had planned on maintaining her silence even in the face of Tatsuya's interrogation, but swiftly reevaluated that this wasn't the time and place. Lina replied back in a bitter tone.

"The definition coined at the London Conference. I already knew that."

Yet, Tatsuya's rejoinder was so shocking that it struck Lina dumb for a solid ten seconds.

"……Really, you guys. Don't tell me that all high school students in Japan would say the same thing."

"Relax. By all standards, we are exceptions."

Whether Lina could understand the hidden nuances behind his reference as exceptions rather than special remained unknown.

"Well?"

Since Tatsuya himself wasn't clearly conscious of this, it would hardly be surprising if Lina missed it.

"Parasites possess the human body and bring about mutations in humans. Though there seems to be some connection with its compatibility with the host, the Parasite's movements seemed to be based off the host's self-preservation instincts."

"In other words, it wants to possess one of us."

"Most likely."

"How?"

"Uncertain, which is why I'm hoping someone will teach me."

"……How very useless."

"Well, excuse me!"

During this rough exchange of insults, Tatsuya and Katsuto still cooperated to completely nullify the Parasite's attacks. Regardless, rather than hoping, Tatsuya held the belief that the Parasite's energy was finite.

The information body's energy transfer system remained a mystery to him, but Tatsuya felt that it was highly unlikely that their opponent could endlessly release magic. Once it arrived at the conclusion that it couldn't possess one of the five people in Tatsuya's group – either through consciousness or instinct – it might elect to try and find another host elsewhere. Of course, that being said, purposefully allowing a possession was out of the question. He wasn't arrogant enough to put himself on such a pedestal.

—Any strategy that would yield a breakthrough remained elusive.

"Shoot…… Erika's being targeted."

Keeping Mizuki safely at his back, Mikihiko was completely focused on watching his companions as those words involuntarily slipped from his mouth.

"Did it notice that Erika is the only one who can't hurt it….."

The foundation of Erika's magic techniques favored close quarters combat against physical foes. Beyond long range shockwaves that could weaken an enemy, she didn't possess any other abilities to counter enemies without a physical body.

Mikihiko might be loath to admit this, but he was seriously growing worried. If he was any calmer, he might have noticed Mizuki overhearing his every word, a realization that would have immediately prompted him to stop his careless words.

"If we at least knew where it was, then there would be some way to retaliate……"

At Mikihiko's muttering, Mizuki steeled herself.

"Yoshida-kun, please remove the barrier."

"Eh?"

Mikihiko's panicked response was not because he had forgotten about Mizuki's presence, but rather because of the unexpected nature of her request.

"Shibata-san, what are you planning?"

"I might be able to tell where it is exactly."

At these words, Mikihiko finally realized that he had been verbalizing his internal thoughts out loud. A terribly rueful expression crossed his face.

Yet, Mizuki seemed not to care. Buoyed by a fierce will, she pinned Mikihiko in place with her upward gaze.

"……I can't, the stimulation would be far too strong for you. Even if I suppressed the demonic aura, there would still be side effects. I don't even know what will happen once the barrier comes down and you stare directly into that demonic aura. In the worst case scenario, there is the chance of going blind."

"Since the moment I chose to become a Magician, I have long resolved myself to face that risk. Erika-chan is in serious danger, no? If I don't provide any assistance now, then the power I hold will truly become pointless. My very purpose for being here becomes null and void."

He knew exactly what Mizuki was trying to say. Mikihiko was educated under precisely the same set of values.

However, Mizuki was a young girl born to an affluent but mundane – mundane referred to the fact that her family was not magically gifted – family who just happened to manifest her ancestor's natural ability to see spirits. Her bloodline was so thin, her family so peripheral that if she had not been born, their connection to their magical practitioner of an ancestor would never have been known. She should have been raised by a pair of parents who knew nothing of the ways of Magicians.

There was no reason she should have been so resolute. She was a young woman who didn't need to bear such determination.

You cannot say these words – say things like that, Mikihiko wanted to say. Those were words that were more befitting of people like himself who saw themselves as nothing more than that which accompanied magic, who used magic to obtain livelihood and recompense from their fellow man, and not the words of a young girl who just so happened to be born with magic. At least, that was how Mikihiko felt.

Setting aside that he was only a "young man", this was what Mikihiko was considering.

"……I understand."

Finally, he could only bow before Mizuki's request. How ironic was it that he had been given a shove from behind by the very same restrictive values that bound him as a scion of a famous magical family.

Mikihiko pulled out a folded cloth from his sports jacket pocket and handed it to Mizuki. Seeing Mizuki accepting the cloth without fully comprehending, he motioned for her to "try and spread it out". That cloth was surprisingly thin and its area barely covered a shawl. This was an artifact for magical defense that was based off the "Ofudas" in Shinto artifacts.

"Wear that around your neck. If you feel in danger, immediately pull it over your eyes. This should have the same effect as the glasses Shibata-san wears."

Persuaded by Mikihiko's stern tone, Mizuki tied the thin cloth around her neck without skepticism.

Now, Mikihiko reached out with one hand and untied the cloth from her head and shifted it so that both sides were symmetrical on her shoulders as the cloth fell before her chest.

Mizuki seemed to be overly nervous at the slight touches to her head and shoulders, but Mikihiko seemed intent on something else.

"Promise me you will never force yourself. Erika would never want someone to sacrifice themselves for her."

"……I promise."

With Mikihiko's eyes locked onto her, Mizuki forgot her embarrassment and nodded.

After hearing Mikihiko's whispered words, "We're going in", Mizuki tightly clasped the two ends of the cloth that dangled down.

A simple yes seemed like such a short reply, but she had to give it her all so that her voice didn't quaver.

Mizuki was so terrified that she couldn't even tell herself not to be afraid.

Yet amazingly, she never even thought of running away.

For some mysterious reason, Mizuki sincerely believed that this was to be her role.

Mikihiko muttered something that Mizuki could not understand.

In the next instant, a wave of chaos came rushing forward.

She didn't even have time to register the pain in her eyes.

Mizuki felt pain stabbing all over her body.

She couldn't even tell which part of her body was in pain.

Pumping strength into her buckling knees, she opened her eyes.

On an average day, how much had she missed by closing her eyes – Mizuki finally got that kind of feeling.

Before her eyes that beheld another world, there was a foreign object sticking out like a sore thumb.

Mizuki's instincts told her that that was the Parasite.

The magic shot out by the Parasite vanished when it came into contact with Katsuto's barrier.

Mizuki was able to see the tiny threads that seemed to be hidden in that electrical attack.

The long, thin strands stalked towards Miyuki, Lina, and Erika, but were blocked aside by Katsuto's barrier and torn to shreds by Tatsuya's shots.

Mizuki had no basis for this, but she believed those thin strands tucked inside the electrical attack would invade the human body through the body's electrical current.

She could only watch.

"There."

Her mouth moved on its own as her wrist spontaneously pointed. Mizuki was like the audience on the other side of the silver screen as she watched this sight.

"Approximately 20 meters above Erika-chan's head, one meter to the right, 50 meters to the rear. That is the point of contact."

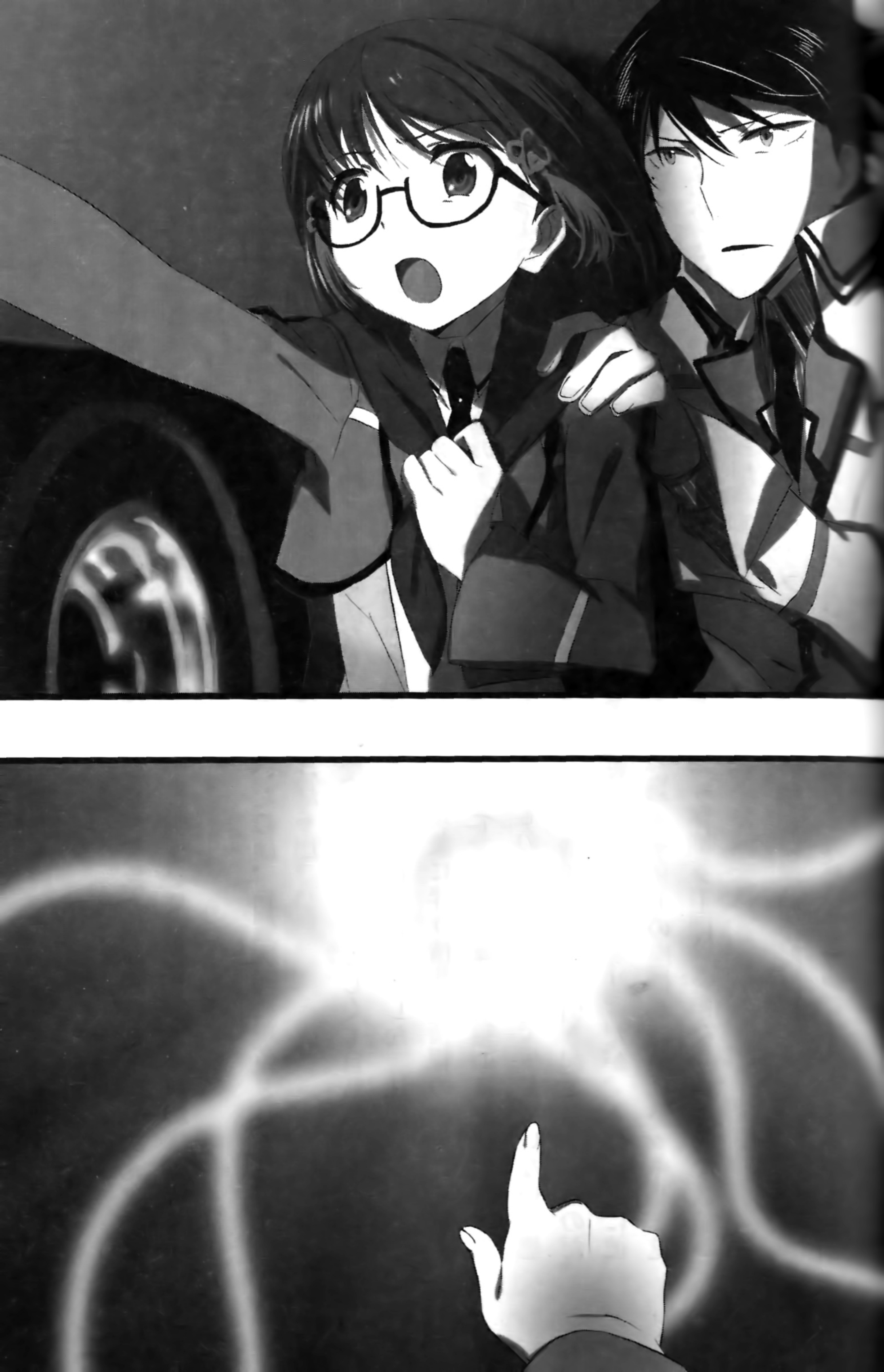
Mizuki pointed out the hole in the world that enabled these strands to slip out.

Mikihiko didn't even bother to waste time on speaking as his fingers danced across the CAD. It was a fan-shaped equipment. He opened the talisman that recorded Yamashina's flames, infused his psions, and deployed the Activation Sequence.

Anti-demon magic, Karura-En – specifically designed to counter things that were not information bodies. The independent information body that formed its "flames" shot towards the coordinates that Mizuki pointed at.

While Tatsuya was aware of the concept of "ignition" despite the lack of any materialization of "something burning", he truly witnessed that the magic launched against the detached information body had brought harm to the Parasite.

While that was the enemy's situation before his eyes, Tatsuya could not help but be caught by surprise.



SB Magic – the fundamentals of Spirit Magic were known to Tatsuya. Using free floating, independent information bodies in the Idea to interfere with information bodies that have been separated from the phenomena, then materializing the physical effects of the independent information body was the system how Spirit Magic worked.

Right now, the magic displayed by Mikihiko functioned along the same theory. The difference was that the materialization effect was not happening in the physical dimension but in the nonphysical dimension.

For magic that was designed to act upon the information body, this was neither rare nor astounding. The magic he wielded to break down information bodies was the same and was magic that, on some level, overwrote the information body itself.

However, Mikihiko's magic used one of the cornerstone principles behind the systems of magic theory by utilizing the fact that "if phenomena are accompanied by information bodies, then the information body that accompanies the phenomena is recorded in the Idea", thus using the information body that tagged along and not interfering with the physical dimension to directly interfere with the Idea. The "combustion" never occurred in the physical world, but something in the Idea was rewritten to "being burnt".

The systems of magic were all about using magic to turn a concept on its head. Nonetheless, what shocked him even more was that coordinates of the Parasite that had hitherto been dancing in and out of his grasp were suddenly clearly within his vision. There was a sense of an imaginary value suddenly being granted a real value.

The term Schrödinger's Cat flashed across his mind.

Whether the cat in the box was alive or dead could only be verified by opening the box. Contrary to the original creator's intent, this thought experiment had a unique approach by using an observer's observations to determine the veracity of the truth. Regardless of whether one subscribed to the Copenhagen or Everett theory, the fact remained that the undeniable truth was that the observer was uncertain of the truth.

In the case of the Parasite – that which was called a "monster" of an information body, once it had been observed by an observer, wouldn't the same sequence of events be repeated by a third party?

Through Mizuki's vision, has the existence that previously dwelled in the nonphysical dimension grown stronger?

If that's the case……

(This time Mizuki is in danger!)

There was no way that the Parasite would be ignorant that someone's eyes possessed the power to alter its very composition.

Tatsuya frantically concentrated on his "vision".

Within his mind's eye, the scene he was most worried about was unfolding.

He thought about this for less than a moment.

Tatsuya raised his left hand that wasn't holding a CAD towards Mizuki.

When you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.

This was public knowledge even without Nietzsche's words. In order to look into a passage you must see through, then there was the possibility of an opponent seeing you through the passage.

Just as Mizuki caught sight of the Parasite, so too did the Parasite catch sight of Mizuki.

"Incoming!"

Hearing Mizuki's loud, almost grim warning – or rather, it may have just been a tragic cry – Mikihiko quickly erected the barrier.

"Where is it!?"

Mikihiko pushed the barrier to its maximum strength as quickly as possible while he queried Mizuki for the Parasite's current position.

The defensive magic he cast almost on reflex was the same barrier he deployed earlier.

This magic primarily veiled them against the enemy.

The durability against invasion was low and once discovered, its veiling power was decreased by half.

Mikihiko himself was well aware of the need to press the attack from their side.

Yet, Mizuki had no time to answer the question.

She was pressing both hands to her eyes.

Mikihiko didn't have the heart to reprimand her.

Mizuki had never stood toe to toe with the "demonic", and Mikihiko knew she was nothing more than an inexperienced young girl. This was the reason why Erika asked Mikihiko to protect Mizuki, and why Mikihiko fully planned on doing so. In the face of the "demonic", it was only natural that Mizuki was reduced to this state, which was why they pulled so far back in the first place.

As the Parasite approached to a range where even he wasn't sure he could survive, Mizuki went to pieces just as was expected, so he wasn't going to berate her.

In addition – there was no time.

The Parasite extended a "thread". Although Mikihiko couldn't see the thread, he was sure that "something" mixed in with the light was trying to seize hold of Mizuki.

It wasn't like there was nothing Mikihiko could do. Even if he couldn't see the actual body, he still possessed techniques that could sever the spiritual effects. Originally, Ancient Magic practitioners like Mikihiko were more accustomed to combating the spiritual than physical phenomena.

Nonetheless, at the same time, the traditional artes of Ancient Magic required a long time to activate. The decisive lack of speed during critical situations was one of the primary reasons why modern magic had become mainstream while Ancient Magic had fallen by the wayside.

In spite of this, Mikihiko was still launching the anti-demon magic "Exorcism Cut" at the breach in his barrier. Though its strength paled in comparison to ritual magic, the magic's speed rivaled that of the artes used by Magicians of the Forbidden Sect.

Forming into a blade, the psions shredded the threads sent forth by the Parasite.

Unfortunately, this was only a temporary measure.

Even if this could break the curse, there was no way of damaging the source.

Immediately, several other threads slunk towards Mizuki.

Mikihiko knew that this was a losing cause, but still let fly with Exorcism Cut.

—However, before the blade could be swung.

Swifter than Mikihiko's Exorcism Cut, a rampaging gale of invisible light blew away the actual body along with its "threads".

The cloth that she borrowed from Mikihiko successfully kept away the uncomfortable wave motions that seeped past her glasses.

Yet, the amazing thing was that not feeling "uncomfortable" didn't mean she was unable to see them. Several shimmering strands of dark light billowed down from the figure in the sky, like a crab dancing in the wind.

Even so, none of this diminished the terror she felt.

Also, there was another flaw.

Even if she closed her eyes, she could still see it. Even if she didn't want to, she could still see it.

There were thin tentacles that wanted to rush towards her. Those were the things she could see. Both the biological and inherent horror were enough to send her normal thoughts screeching to a halt.

She could sense that Mikihiko was shouting, but as to what he was shouting, she remained oblivious.

If she had kept going any longer, her mind would have suffered horribly.

Maybe when compared to her body rotting away, her mind would be devoured first.

What saved her then, was the oncoming tide of brilliant psions.

Much like the scene that greeted her eyes half a year ago in that lab, but this time the force was even more overwhelming.

Although this was barely in the nick of time, there was no such thing as running out of active psions during a battle where magic was being wielded.

His right hand was stronger with Decomposition magic, but unlike Gram Dispersal, for Gram Demolition it didn't matter which hand he used even without a CAD. In that instant, Tatsuya gathered the maximum amount of psions in his left hand.

As he suspected, thanks to the event with Mizuki's vision, the creature's existence in this world was stabilizing. As it drew closer to her, the fluctuations in the Parasite's coordinates became much smaller, and the scattered points began to congregate.

Even if the information body existed, the Parasite that once baffled Tatsuya regarding its location and how it could be killed could now be fully analyzed.

Still, there was no time for him to convey that message. The tentacles that Mikihiko was severing – in Tatsuya's imagination, it looked like an irregular protozoa extending filamentous pseudopods – immediately regrew and reached towards Mizuki.

Alas, he had no other options.

—He slightly squinted his eyes,

—Took aim at the target and imagined the shot.

—Tatsuya released the block of compressed psions he held in his left hand.

With the palm set as the firing point for Gram Demolition, the storm of psions stampeded towards the Parasite and sent both it and its tentacles flying.

"Shibata-san, are you alright!?"

Mikihiko's voice was so stunned that he sounded like he was on the verge of jumping to his feet. Hearing this, Tatsuya lowered the left arm he had raised.

He bitterly gritted his teeth at the expected result of him calling on his Nonsystematic magic.

Gram Demolition contained the word "demolition", but in practice the magic was more like using the pressure of a psion tide to flood away the information body.

In situations where the target was a Magic Sequence, the technique could strip a Magic Sequence's functions through the Eidos, hereby creating its magic nullifying effect as Counter Magic.

The majority of Magic Sequences would collapse under the strain of the information matrix being shattered at the moment of impact, hence the name "Demolition", but in reality, the psion tide from Gram Demolition did not possess the ability to destroy information bodies. When faced with a target that had a sturdier design than Magic Sequences, there was a high possibility that the information matrix would be blown away rather than destroyed.

Even with those realizations in mind, Tatsuya still chose to use Gram Demolition at that time.

In order to save Mizuki.

Because Tatsuya really couldn't think of any other solution.

"It got away……"

Tatsuya didn't respond to Katsuto's murmur. By using Gram Demolition in that situation and removing the Parasite from the field, there was a rising possibility that they might have lost the chance to deliver the final blow. Tatsuya had already turned over that scenario in his head, but the result still turned out this way.

"Ah, oh well. Although it got away, it didn't emerge unscathed. Since no one was injured, I think this result is satisfactory."

Katsuto's words weren't all meant to be comforting. When faced with an expected attack from the Parasite, they still managed to escape without casualties. It's just that this particular encounter was a snare that they devised. Maybe their opponent never planned on fighting in the first place.

Since they elected to take a battle that wasn't necessary and wasn't unavoidable, the bottom line was for there to be no casualties. The primary objective was to capture the target, the secondary objective was to annihilate the enemy. If the above could not be achieved, then at the very least they needed to obtain new clues to help unmask their enemy's capabilities.

In other words, from Tatsuya's perspective on their combat priorities, their net gain was effectively zero. The most they could say was that their score wasn't negative.

(What a disaster……)

Tatsuya forcibly made sure he didn't say this aloud.

If he said this,

Miyuki would worry.

Mizuki would blame herself.

Erika would be hurt.

For Tatsuya, this was nothing more than rubbing salt into an open wound. There was no way Tatsuya would do something that would leave such a mess on his hands.

Chapter 9

It had gotten weaker.

It originally didn't belong to this world, nor did it come to this world of its own free will.

It possessed the intrinsic quality that was naturally drawn by strong pushion wave motions.

Euphoria, despair, hatred, and hope.

Practically on the level of prayer, the cravings for pushion wave motions drew it through the momentary fluctuation in the "barrier" from the immaterial world to a physical one.

Thanks to the shock from passing through the barrier, it had split into twelve portions and dwelt inside the humans who beckoned them over.

In order to survive, it was forced to continuously ingest pushions. So long as it existed, there would be an endless stream of pushions leaking away.

However, in this physical world, it was unable to gather pushions independently. Without merging with a physical form that was capable of gathering pushions, there was no way to obtain any more.

After repeatedly using its power while still in its basic form, much of its energy reserves gathered since arriving in this physical world had been lost. On top of this, after being immersed in a high pressure stream of psions, the portion that enabled it to invade the physical dimension had largely been shorn away. With it, much of the psions were gone as well. In order to survive, pushions were absolutely vital, but with insufficient psions, interfering with the physical world would become difficult.

Its actual body was not capable of high level cognitive thinking. Given that it was the result of the magnified reflections of its hosts' suppressed impulses, it was nothing more than a monster. There was only enough cognition within that body to plot survival. Even so, even its limited cognition was aware that in its currently enfeebled state, passing through the barrier of consciousness to obtain a new host was highly difficult.

It needed a place to rest. A location that was meaningless, save for its large congregation of pushions.

For example, blood that had just been separated from a living body.

For example, a mindless doll granted a humanoid form to obtain pushions.

It avoided the moving humans and finally located a receptacle for rest in one of the storage rooms located near the edge of First High's campus.

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The next morning after the seven of them combined to beat back the Parasite – and not destroying it.

"Good morning, Tatsuya-kun."

"Good morning, Mizuki, Mikihiko. ……Is Erika still like that?"

In his classroom, Tatsuya ran across a certain female friend who was sitting at her seat with both arms propping up her face and fuming.

"Good morning, Tatsuya. ……She's still like that. Pretty much just sulking."

"I am not sulking!"

Next to where Mikihiko was chuckling wryly and nodding his head, Erika scoffed and returned to her "sour position".

Of course, there was a reason behind why she was adopting such an easily understood position.

During lunch break yesterday, after the vampire transformed into its information body form and the subsequent desperate struggle, they finally beat back the enemy. Afterwards, despite the overwhelming 6-to-1 advantage over Lina, Tatsuya let her go without attempting to subdue her.

Herein lay the reason why Erika was sulking. She believed that Lina was working alongside the vampires. Behind all this, Erika had no way of retaliating against the Parasite once it took on the form of an information body. This was simply a matter of someone being adept at handling certain opponents and not others and certainly not something to be ashamed about, except Erika seemed to think otherwise. She furiously argued her case when Tatsuya was about to let Lina go, to the point that she even swung her blade at Lina. –That was probably her temper talking. In the end, Erika never really planned on actually connecting with the hit, but she quieted down after Mikihiko held both of her arms back from behind. (Yet, she laid a full blown beat down on Mikihiko for what she termed sexual harassment due to him latching onto her from behind.)

Still, this did not signify that Erika accepted this result, and her displeasure was on full display ever since yesterday after lunch.

"Erika, it's about time for you to let go."

Despite Tatsuya directly striking up a conversation with her, she still kept her back to him.

"I believe I clarified this yesterday, right? At that time, the welcoming party had already arrived."

The words were intentionally vague after taking eavesdroppers into account, but the "welcoming party" referred to the reinforcements that Lina had summoned.

"Just yesterday's situation was enough of a ruckus already. Anything more than that could not possibly be kept from the students. In the worst case scenario, we might even have had a panic on our hands."

—Speaking of which, the person pulling overtime keeping everything under wraps was Mayumi and not Tatsuya.

"I get all that……"

Such things were within Erika's understanding, but she still maintained her sulky mutterings while keeping her back to Tatsuya.

"In addition, we needed to compromise for the sake of the employees from Maximilian Devices."

—Furthermore, the one who created a situation that necessitated that compromise was Tatsuya while the one who actually brokered the mediation was Lina (well, her subordinates at any rate).

"I never said that Lina is completely innocent, but there was no need to paint her as completely black at the time. If Lina is truly guilty, then we will plan accordingly. I will hold nothing back when the time comes."

Tatsuya spoke in his usual tone, but the danger lingering behind his words caused Erika to turn her head.

"……Can you win?"

Erika wasn't aware that the crimson haired Magician with the golden pupils was actually Lina. Still, based on their back and forth struggle with the Parasite yesterday, she instinctively judged that Lina was no run of the mill opponent.

"Victory and defeat are a matter of luck. Furthermore, there's no proof that Lina will begin the offensive."

"But you're not going to hold back."

"Naturally."

Tatsuya's tone was too placid, but that only served to highlight his utter sincerity. As for the listeners around them, Mikihiko had already shrank back while Mizuki was clearly cowed. Yet, Tatsuya's display sat perfectly well with Erika, allowing her to completely revert to her usual mood.

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Meanwhile, Lina was tasting the bitter dregs of discomfort for the first time in her life after calling in sick from school.

In terms of humiliation, there was the full body search she had to undergo prior to her meeting with the President over tea, but there was nothing more to that than being humiliating towards women. However, in terms of discomfort, her current hearing at the USNA embassy more than rivaled that experience.

"……Still, given your status as Sirius of Stars, the fact that you didn't even resist against high school students and allowed them to take the suspect is……"

She wanted to retort that Michaela Honda self-destructed instead of being taken, but Lina understood that the investigator wasn't referring to that as the issue so she could only meekly bow her head.

"In addition, I believe the suspect was the technician who lived next door. You didn't notice anything after living together for almost a month?"

This time, Lina really wanted to scream her objection. Weren't you the ones who arranged for that "suspect" to accompany me as a technician because I'm not suited for undercover work? –Not that this was something she could say aloud, so owing to this reason, Lina's stress level was only rising and not dropping.

Immediately afterward, the chatter continued with their irritating words. No matter how talented she was as a Magician, Lina was only a teenage Major. There were many in the USNA military who were jealous of Lina for her youth, and this was especially the case among officers who possessed no combat experience. Right now, the men in front of her (why wasn't there a single female investigator) were exemplary models of officers "who have never been under fire".

Lina was cognizant of the fact that getting enraged over this was pointless (at least that was her perspective), so she just let the irksome words fly by her, until,

"Speaking of which, has the major undergone a full physical examination? You've made contact with the infected on multiple occasions, correct? There is an immediate need to verify if there are any bite marks. If you have not, please do so here immediately."

This preposterous statement coupled with insane logic that was practically sexual harassment left Lina flabbergasted. Likewise, the enemy was only called a "vampire" out of convenience; no victims had actually been bitten. Lina was in complete disbelief that they were sitting there in all their arrogance without even reading the report, but before all that – Do these filthy bastards want me to strip right here and right now!?

"That is more than a little discourteous to the Major, I believe."

The only reason she was able to pull back from the brink of an explosion was because reinforcements arrived in the nick of time. Thanks to this, Lina was able to hold onto her reputation as "a youthful individual who was able to keep her cool and think ahead" – except this was not just a simple label.

"Colonel Barans?"

There were more than a couple individuals who wanted to shout down the woman who barged into this meeting – on some level at least – but upon realizing who she was, none of these heroes was brave enough to stick their neck out.

She was Colonel Virginia Barans. While one might mistake her for someone within the Stars based on that title, it was actually her real name. Just a few days ago, she should have bid farewell to the last few days in the thirties, but her valiant, older sister-like appearance belied the fact that she was in her forties.

Yet, the terrifying part was not her rank or youthful appearance. In terms of rank, half of the officers present had experience serving at a hearing before.

The committee members (to put it nicely) treated her with deference due to her title.

USNA Joint Chiefs of Staff Intelligence Division, Internal Affairs, First Deputy Director.

After the Canadian military was assimilated and reorganized, she became number two of the department established to monitor both those in uniform and black ops. That was Colonel Barans's task.

Given the nature of this mission, it was wholly unsurprising for her to be present. Actually, it was odder for her not to be present in the very beginning given the stakes. –Based on her position and duties, it was simply impossible for the committee members investigating the Japan incident to be unaware of her presence.

Once she suddenly stepped in, reprimanding her was frankly impossible.

"With all due respect, permission to speak freely?"

The colonel locked her gaze onto the committee members sitting at the highest row as she spoke her request, and only her literal words were assiduous.

"Ah, uh. Granted."

"Thank you very much. In regards to exactly why I was excluded from this meeting, I will get to the bottom of this at some other opportunity."

Colonel Barans didn't even spare a single glance at the petrified expressions on the committee members' faces as she turned her eyes on Lina.

"This time, the mission given to Major Sirius was ill suited for both her talents and duties, so I am of the belief that it is completely inappropriate to place all of the mission's failure on her shoulders."

Small whisperings began to permeate the room. Colonel Barans wasn't invited because the committee members feared they would have to tread softly around someone like her who was fluent in military law and command. Still others believed that she would support Lina simply because she too was also a woman.

Still, Colonel Barans's direct approach in covering for Lina took everyone by surprise.

"Regardless of responsibility, the fact that someone holding the title of the Stars' High Commander fell short of someone else in magical combat is worthy of further investigation. After all, 'Sirius' represents the strongest Magician within our army."

Lina tightly clasped her hands. What Colonel Barans pointed out resonated with her more than anyone else.

Unwilling to accept defeat, Lina's teeth could be heard grinding against one another.

"Naturally, Major Sirius would love to avenge herself. Wouldn't she, Major?"

"Of course!"

At Lina's affirmative answer, the colonel's eyes drifted over to the other men at the bench.

"I propose that Major Sirius continue with her present mission. At the same time, I also request that her local support be upgraded to the highest level."

"Strictly speaking, what are you referring to in regards to the highest level of support?"

One of the committee members spoke up to the colonel, to which Colonel Barans replied with a dauntless smile.

"In the name of investigating the officers stationed locally, I will also be transferred to Tokyo."

This time, the ruckus lasted for quite a while without disappearing.

"Furthermore, after contacting the director, we have obtained clearance to deploy 'Brionac'."

The ruckus turned into uproar.

"Colonel, is this true?"

Lina's expression could only be described as "disbelief".

"Indeed."

The colonel smiled warmly in regards to the question that might have been seen as overstepping one's rank before adding one more sentence.

"I brought it with me."

After stepping out of the meeting room, Lina found Silvia waiting for her.

"Silvie, where have you been? Up until now I have been in serious predicaments lately."

Lina hadn't seen Silvia for the better part of an entire day. After returning home safely from First High yesterday, for some reason she couldn't find Silvia either at home or their secret meeting place.

Thanks to the stress from the hearing, Lina's tone was a little petulant. Even so, this was well within the boundaries of a joke for close friends, and the typical Silvia would have just laughed it off. However, Silvia wore a sincere expression as she accepted Lina's reprimand and straightened her posture before a strange "I'm terribly sorry" to Lina.

"Eh, Silvie? Just stop. I'm not being serious."

"I know Lina wasn't being serious. Still, I must apologize to you."

Realizing that this conversation was entering serious territory, Lina frowned.

"If I could have found out Michaela's real identity sooner, Lina wouldn't have been forced into such a tough spot."

Saying that this wasn't the case would be pushing it too far. Yesterday, she had been completely cut off in a ring of enemies. Lina was quite aware of this, so she was unable to deny the truth of those words.

"During this incident, I have failed to fulfill my duties as your support. For that, I am sincerely sorry, High Commander."

"What's with this, Silvie? This is like saying goodbye—"

"High Commander."

Lina's words were curtailed by Silvia, who was no longer referring to her by name.

"I have received orders from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to return home. Last night's investigation determined that there is the possibility of infestation, so I will be returning home for intense examination."

"That's impossible! The mutations aren't even being caused by pathogens! How can medicine tell the difference if there's no sign of infestation prior of mutation!"

"That is precisely the reason why this is necessary, Major."

"Colonel!?"

A voice came from behind them as if scolding Lina for getting caught up in her emotions. It belonged to none other than Colonel Barans, who had just extracted Lina from her predicament(?).

"My apologies. I didn't mean to overhear you."

"No, after all, it was us who were standing here talking."

"Is that so?"

Colonel Barans smiled gently at Lina's nervous reply before adopting a more serious expression as she answered Lina's earlier question.

"In regards to Lieutenant Mercury's treatment, it is just as Major Sirius said earlier: there is no method of detecting the mutation prior to its occurrence. In other words, there is no way to tell if the lieutenant has been infected."

"Then I too!"

"Exactly. Nor is there any guarantee that the major is unscathed. However, in the event that the major turns her fangs against the military, the military's losses will be incalculable. Thus, the major cannot return home until deemed to be free of infection."

Lina's face went pale. In essence, she had been exiled until they could determine if she was infested by a Parasite. That much she understood. In other words, Colonel Barans was allowing Lina to continue her mission with this in mind.

"On the other hand, in the event that Lieutenant Mercury turns into a vampire and betrays the military, there is the possibility of our forces' classified intelligence leaking to foreign nations after taking the lieutenant's talents into consideration. Thus, the lieutenant must return home as soon as possible."

This also made sense. Though her emotions rebelled against the notion, her perspective as a soldier was unable to deny the truth of those words.

"In light of this, I have arranged for someone else to provide you with support."

"No, there is no need."

Colonel Barans's suggestion was necessary, but did contain a hint of goodwill. Nonetheless, Lina rejected her offer.

"Anyone cohabitating with me would run the risk of infestation. Fortunately, Japanese apartments are well equipped enough that living alone wouldn't be a burden."

"Really? If that is your wish, then I will make the arrangements."

"Thank you."

The two of them saluted Colonel Barans as she left before Silvia turned a wry smile towards Lina.

"High Commander."

"Silvie, drop the formal talk. Just call me Lina like you usually do."

"……Affirmative. Lina, I'm a little worried at leaving such a sleepyhead like you behind when I return home."

"That's rude! Also, the only time I ever overslept was yesterday!"

Faced with that fuming face, Silvia responded with a smile that was free of any tears.

"There's no way Lina would be infested. Our Sirius is not so weak that she can be taken over by that monster."

"—That's a given. I will never bow to the Parasite. Next time we meet, I will definitely burn it to ashes."

"You're right. So you better wrap up this mission and return home, High Commander."

Seeing the laughter bubbling in Silvia's eyes as she saluted, Lina confidently replied back in the affirmative.

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For appearance's sake, Kuroba Mitsugu had arrived in Yokohama on business, though he was currently viewing the telephone ring in his hotel room with deep suspicion. He had not informed his business partner of his lodgings because wireless phones could reach him anywhere, and so there was no need to tell the other side which hotel he was at. For the same reason, his kin wouldn't be calling him either. If this was related to his ulterior task, all the more reason that they shouldn't be using the hotel phone.

"Hello, it's me."

Yet, he felt no need to pretend that he was absent. When using a phone that relied strictly on vocal communication, he picked up the phone without delivering his own name just in case.

"Mitsugu, do you have time right now?"

The instant he heard the voice coming across the phone, Mitsugu's back involuntarily tightened in anxiety.

"Maya-sama…… Of course, that's not a problem at all."

He possessed enough self-control to ensure that his voice did not waver before the head of the Yotsuba Family, though that should be expected of the head of the family's side branch responsible for the Yotsuba intelligence network. For Mitsugu, Maya counted as an older cousin. His mother was the younger sister of the head of the Yotsuba Family two generations ago and his son was one of the candidates for the next head of house. In the strictest sense, the Yotsuba Family had no semblance of direct lineage, but based on the normal application, Mitsugu was as close to a "direct line" as one could get. Yet, it was precisely because his bloodline was closer related that Mitsugu knew how terrifying Maya could be.

The enigma behind why Maya used the hotel's phone to call him was immediately solved. Like FLT, this hotel was one of the dummy corporations that was controlled by the Yotsuba Family in the background. The secret room that Mitsugu was currently using was only accessible to those affiliated with the Yotsuba Family. In all actuality, Mitsugu considered it a failure on his part that he didn't immediately realize the call originated from the household.

Not that he said anything, of course.

"Is there an emergency? If so, please give me your orders."

"Hey, Mitsugu …… Could you please change that overly dramatic speech pattern of yours?"

"Ho, my beautiful cousin-sama. Calling this overdramatizing certainly pains my heart. I have always spoken with utter sincerity."

Over the phone, Maya could be heard sighing in exasperation. This terrifying cousin of his unexpectedly liked to play along with other's jokes. Under normal circumstances, speaking any more would result in a retort for sure. Thanks to this interaction, Mitsugu had completely composed himself. Still, this may also have been his cousin's ploy, though Mitsugu knew that thinking too deeply on this did him no favors whatsoever.

"Then let's cut to the chase…… Mitsugu, have you finished identifying the Parasites' hosts?"

Mitsugu was self-conscious of the fact that his face stiffened. Without any preamble, this was his true task, Mitsugu's original mission. Mitsugu was cognizant of this, which was why he wasn't lazing about and reported all he knew.

"There are a total of 12 of them. Four were eliminated by the Americans, one was done in yesterday by Miyuki-chan and Tatsuya-kun, so there are 7 left. I have also identified their current location."

"Efficient as always. Just as expected of you, Mitsugu."

"No, the Saegusa and Chiba Families were very industrious in drawing their attention. This saved me from baiting them out."

"How humble of you."

Mitsugu didn't deny this. His earlier words were humble just as Maya said. Originally, the remaining 7 targets were only located last night, so this was "barely passing".

"In reality, the client asked us to hasten this morning. They said that it was unacceptable for the monsters that are contaminating Tokyo to raise any more havoc."

"How stringent. But Tokyo isn't within the Yotsuba Family's responsibility."

The tightening around Mitsugu's face wasn't just an act. Thanks to the aforementioned reason, moving pawns in Tokyo required additional hassle.

"They're probably also getting pressure from elsewhere. Well, given this case, let's finish this."

"Finish, meaning?"

Mitsugu inquired in a solemn tone. If he misinterpreted her words, he was going to pull in an unimaginable amount of overtime.

"Eradicate all the hosts."

Maya's voice was particularly decisive. There was no sense that she was suppressing any emotion or being intentionally cold. The head of the Yotsuba Family spoke in a voice that was – if this is the right way to describe it – perfectly normal.

"Not subjugate, correct?"

"Indeed. Annihilate them all."

"But if the hosts die now, the Parasite will fly off to seek other hosts. More time would be required to identify the new host……"

"That's not a problem. I'm more interested in how does the Parasite detach after the host dies? How far can they move as information bodies? How long does it take to fully assimilate within a new host? And how much time is needed before they can move again?"

"Would you like me to report in after I observe this?"

"I believe this will be valuable data. Can you do this?"

Mitsugu still held the phone and, even though it was voice only, bowed deeply.

"As you command."

"Check back in with me after destroying them."

"Please give me until the day after tomorrow."

"That will be fine. Then, that will be all."

Mitsugu once more affirmed his orders and hung up.

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He gathered the psions into his palm and tightly clasped them.

This was what he always envisioned when using "Gram Demolition".

During the usual Gram Demolition, the clasped psions struck towards the deploying Activation Sequence or the Magic Sequence that was in the process of altering some phenomenon. Yet right now, what Tatsuya desired was not a skill that could accurately target the information body acting upon the material world, but a technique that could snipe the information body immersed in the Idea.

Essentially, a method that could directly attack the actual body of the Parasite that dwelt in the Idea's tides.

He tightened his grasp.

His arm was not thrust forward.

It was more of a hassle to apply movement to fulfill the directional requirement. Trajectory and flight path do not exist within the Idea, existence within the Idea depended solely upon his definition.

Once the isolated information body set as the target –[seemed like some sort of shikigami]– congregated, Tatsuya released the block of psions into the Idea.

In the material world, multiple objects were not able to exist in the same location at once.

However, the Idea had no such restriction. Nor did that restriction apply to any information body that existed within the Idea. Released towards the isolated information body that served as a "target" the compressed block of psions that Tatsuya released dissipated without achieving any noticeable effect.

"Huh……"

Off to one side, Miyuki was worriedly taking note of Tatsuya's gritted teeth and dismayed expression, whereas Yakumo, who served as the enabler for this training session, struck up a conversation in his usual flighty manner.

"As we surmised, even you're in for a rough outing. Meh, this is a technique that is beyond certain people no matter how hard they work towards it."

In response to those irresponsible words, Miyuki directed a venomous glare at him while her killing intent sharpened.

Yakumo would not be Yakumo if he batted an eyelid. Still, careful scrutiny would reveal cold sweat gathered around his forehead.

"After all, it's only been three days since he started working on an attack that can be used in the Idea, so I thought that there simply wasn't enough time to get acclimated to it yet."

Miyuki's withering glare never lessened despite Yakumo's frantic attempts to explain himself.

"Master, let's try this again please."

However, the moment Tatsuya requested to continue the training session, the focal point of Miyuki's attention once more gathered onto her brother.

—It had been a full week since the day after the vampire invaded the school campus and the ensuing Pyrrhic outcome without victory. On the second day, Tatsuya had reached out to Yakumo regarding training, and today was the seventh day.

Contrary to Yakumo's words, Tatsuya was once again reminded of the difference raw talent made in the past two or three days.

Normal Magicians would consider being able to hit a target in the Idea with psion bullets within three days to be a huge step forward. However, Tatsuya was originally capable of identifying information bodies floating in the Idea. Compared to normal practitioners, he carried a huge advantage even before training began. In spite of that, the fact that even now he still wasn't able to affect the target with psion bullets did not merit high praise.

"Well, acclimation can only be judged by success. Techniques are something that you might not be capable of today, but suddenly are able to accomplish tomorrow."

As if picking up on Tatsuya's harsh self-critique, Yakumo offered a few comforting words.

"Yet, the fact of the matter is that right now isn't the time to wait for 'someday'."

Naturally, this wasn't going to conclude on a few words of comfort.

"In your case, you already know where to aim, I think another way to approach this would be creating an altogether different attack method."

Hearing this, Tatsuya let a bitter smirk slip by despite knowing that it was indecorous.

"It's not that easy to develop new magic out of the blue. Though I admit that progress is rather lackluster, I think you are rating me too highly."

"Really? While you do possess a side that is lacking in talent, in terms of technique modification and innovation you belong in a league of your own.

I certainly don't think that devaluing your own potential is a wise course of action."

"That's perfectly right, Onii-sama!"

Though Tatsuya was not overly enthused, this time it was Miyuki's turn to become animated.

"Only Onii-sama is able to create something that other people don't even dare to dream about!"

……Scratch becoming animated, this was a full blown declaration. In Miyuki's case, this wasn't even speculation on her part.

"Pardon me, but I don't think these paths are mutually exclusive. The use of Gram Demolition to attack directly can be one strategy and new magic development can proceed at the same time, right?"

If this was anyone other than Miyuki, Tatsuya would immediately reject it with something like "don't say something so unreasonable", or a joke like "you want me to die of exhaustion?"

But this was Miyuki, and before those eyes that far exceeded expectation and bordered upon pure faith, it was utterly impossible for Tatsuya to respond with words like "can't be done" or "implausible".

◊ ◊ ◊

Tatsuya and Miyuki weren't the only ones looking forward to a rematch. Erika, Mikihiko, Mayumi, and Katsuto were all preparing for the next conflict – not just this solitary battle, but to combat the threat that the vampires posed. After they began their preparations, bad news came across the Pacific in late January of 2096.

"Onii-sama, this is……!"

The Shiba siblings heard the news over the television as they sat down for breakfast. Tatsuya was struck speechless that the broadcast seemed to be timed precisely for the morning in Japan.

"……Is this the same thing we heard from Shizuku……?"

"……Looks like the watered down version."

After finally finding his voice, Tatsuya replied back in a bitter tone.

The contents of the broadcast were publicized by an anonymous whistleblower within a government organization.

The news was as follows:

—On October 31st of last year, the USNA government ordered the army's Magicians to develop a countermeasure to the secret weapon the Japanese military wielded on the southern part of the Korean peninsula. Magicians at the Dallas National Accelerator Lab ignored experts' warnings and used the particle accelerator to summon demons.

The Magicians wanted to form pacts with the demons to counter the Japanese super weapon.

Unfortunately for them, the binding process failed and they were possessed. The vampires responsible for the civilian disturbances starting late last year were actually military Magicians possessed by these demons. The military will take responsibility for the loss of human life from three perspectives.

First, the failure to prevent the Magicians from engaging in hazardous and reckless experiments.

Second, they forcibly initiated the experiment and still failed, despite knowing the inherently high risks involved.

Third, while there is a high chance that they had lost their consciousness, the fact remains that Magicians attached to the military harmed civilians.

The bottom line was that this unfortunate turnout was the direct result of the military's failure to corral its Magicians. Shouldn't we seriously reevaluate whether magic, a supernatural force that, albeit powerful, has the potential to go rogue at any minute is truly in line with the country's best interests—

"What an interesting way of packaging the message……"

"Then, is this!?"

"The real purpose was to discriminate against Magicians."

Tatsuya's bitter voice that responded to Miyuki's tight expression gave a feeling that was more dazed than worrisome.

"The gist is similar to the 'Humanists', but…… Since the overwhelming majority of people cannot use magic, it's not even worth the time to consider which side the media is going to take. Compared to that, the news source is far more important."

Tatsuya initially reached his hand towards the phone, but halted that motion in the middle.

Who was he going to call……? Among the numerous candidates, for some reason a face that belonged to an opponent who wasn't necessarily a companion crossed Miyuki's mind.

◊ ◊ ◊

The sudden news exploded out of nowhere – though it may be more apt to call this a scandal – and Lina literally had a headache pounding in her head.

Her direct thoughts on the matter told her that now wasn't the time to attend school, but a combat asset like her that was 100% focused in that direction couldn't help quiet things down even if she stayed. Plus, there were her orders to "go about like usual" from Colonel Barans herself.

There was no way she could disobey a direct order from a superior officer.

Nursing her aching head, Lina arrived at the station that said "To First High". Next, there was only a single path leading to the school gates. At least, that was how it should have been.

"Good morning, Lina."

Seeing the silhouette that suddenly blocked the path before her, Lina forgot her headache and immediately turned to flee like a rabbit.

"What's with you all of a sudden, trying to run away when you see someone……?"

"Ah, ha ha ha……"

Lina's tactical retreat ended in failure within three small steps.

That was because Miyuki was standing guard at the ticket booth.

Pressed into a corner by her smiling classmate, Lina could only plaster a smile on her face and try to muddle through. –Not that there was any point to this.

"Ah, forget it. No, it's actually not a good thing, but there's no point in being tardy for this. I have something I need to ask you, so let's chat while we're walking."

"……What do you want to know?"

Wariness on full alert, Lina still obediently followed along because she was in a position where causing a commotion was out of the question. Despite their brief time together, Tatsuya knew she wasn't renowned for her patience and cut right to the chase.

"Did you catch the news this morning?"

"……I saw it, though not because I wanted to."

In response to Tatsuya's inquiry, Lina replied in seemingly genuine discomfort.

"Which of the parts are true?"

Lina had an obligation to answer Tatsuya's questions as honestly as she could.

However, Lina was in the mood for some serious ranting. Thankfully, her conversation partner already knew everything about her so there was no need for any secrecy as she began her tirade.

"All the key parts are lies!"

In the end, she managed to lower her volume, but the tone was quite animated.

"They only laid down the truth on the surface, and it gets worse! It's a perfect example of information control!"

"As expected, it's propaganda."

Despite understanding the literal meaning of Tatsuya's words, Lina tilted her head slightly.

"What, what do you mean by as expected? Propaganda?"

"No, it's just a simple deduction on my part. So, only the basics of the matter are true?"

"……Yes!"

The part she didn't want pointed out was now laid out in the open. Forgetting her confusion from a few seconds ago, Lina replied in frustration.

"Still, information like this should naturally get the classified treatment. I believe that it would be difficult for people on the outside to investigate."

"……It's probably the 'Seven Sages'."

"Seven Sages? Not the Seven Sages of Greece, are they?"

"An organization called the Seven Sages whose identities are unknown."

Hearing Lina's words, Tatsuya was caught by surprise.

"You guys don't know the identities of an organization within USNA borders? Is such a thing possible?"

"It is! Not that I want to admit it!"

Lina's expression clearly advocated the truth of her words.

"The organization's name, Seven Sages, was also supplied from their side and, no matter how hard we try, we haven't found any hint about them. The only detail we can somewhat confirm is that there are seven people holding the title of Sage in their leadership."

"Sages…… Quite the literal definition of the term."

"Which is why I said we don't know who they are!"

"Hold on, Lina. Please do not direct your anger at Onii-sama."

"What, I……"

Not knowing whether she should comment on Miyuki's selective blindness or her inability to read the atmosphere, Lina was on the verge of exploding with something like "What did you say!" or "Are you saying I'm in the wrong here!?" However, after taking a few deep breaths, she managed to avoid any eye-popping behavior.

"……You lose if you pay too much attention, Angelina, and that's just Miyuki being strange like usual. There's no end to this if you take the bro-con declarations from the bro-con sister to heart. Don't pay attention to bro-con weirdo, bro-con weirdo, bro-con weirdo……"

The mantra she chanted to herself in order to calm down fortunately remained unheard and thus free of reprimand.

"Lina?"

"Eh? Sorry, what's up?"

"In regards to the Seven Sages, is there any chance that they are Humanists?"

After listening to Tatsuya's words, Lina thought about it as she walked before shaking her head.

"Although I cannot guarantee this, that's probably impossible. Based on their previous history, Seven Sages is not an organization that lends itself to ideology or fanaticism."

"Setting aside fanaticism for the moment, is it possible for an organization to be free of ideology?"

"……That's a poor way of putting it on my part. There's no prevailing line of thinking for them. Based on our investigation, they seem more like people who delight in the instance of criminal activity. Burning passion towards one particular line of thinking doesn't fit their image. More importantly, the Seven Sages have assisted us in the past, though that appears largely one-sided."

And that was when the name Seven Sages became known, Lina added to her explanation. Tatsuya nodded in understanding and thought, it's true that this does not fit the profile of Humanists.

"Lastly, one more thing."

Though there was still a stretch until the school gates, Tatsuya had already made the declaration that this interrogation was drawing to a close.

"……What?"

Hearing his voice becoming more serious than it was before, Lina's response was guarded.

"Was drawing Parasites from another world the intended result?"

"No."

Lina's reply absolutely rejected Tatsuya's query.

"If you're actually being serious with that question, I'm going to get angry, Tatsuya."

Now that they mention it, Lina was already furious. It's just that her ire wasn't pointed at Tatsuya earlier.

"I have already executed 3 of the 'Infected'. If this is someone's plan all along, there's no way I will forgive him."

◊ ◊ ◊

DD was a white male who was approximately 45 years of age and had a typical appearance of brown hair and eyes. His original name was Donald Douglas, but no one called him "Mr. Douglas". Putting it nicely, it would be a term of endearment, and putting it bluntly, that's because there was no respect involved. Ever since his childhood, everyone from coworkers to roommates had referred to him as "DD" and assumed he was a plain old human being without any positives or negatives.

Three months ago, DD was a dorm manager in Dallas. He had graduated with honors from a technical college. A few missteps (in his personal opinion) along the way had robbed him of a satisfying job, so he switched jobs quite a few times prior to his marriage.

DD was deeply unhappy with his line of work. Despite being a laborer, he held a fairly high position of responsibility in his company, and his compensation certainly wasn't hurting his lifestyle. His income was about average for those who lived in the urban areas of America. Taking into account the Central American territories within the USNA as a whole, he might even exceed the average in some places. Nonetheless, he still believed that he deserved a better job.

In spite of this, he set aside his ambition and placed family first after getting married. Though not blessed with children, their married life was one of happiness. He was a model husband for his wife, but perhaps his self-restraint was too strong. If only he had been a little more honest with himself, he might not have been tempted by the devil that day.

The day of the miniature black hole experiment, he had been responsible for inspecting the electric distributor along the outer wall that was linked to the particle accelerator as he gazed longingly at the massive experimental device. The unfulfilled ambition sealed away in his heart became pure desire that suffused his heart. Still, that should have only been a momentary lapse. After finishing his task, DD mastered himself and returned home to be a good husband. –If a Parasite hadn't possessed him, that is.

That day, he became a vampire. As a latent practitioner, the moment he fully assimilated with the Parasite, his own ability – Hypnosis Force awakened. Using this power, he convinced his wife that they were going to Japan of their own free will.

DD's hypnotic power wasn't that strong. He was unable to force people to do irregular things that lay outside such as their convictions, deeply held sense of values, or religious beliefs. The spell he cast over his wife only hinted that "they were going to Japan on a business trip".

Still, within acceptable boundaries of common sense and logic, he could still forcibly convince others of unnatural commands. For example, it was easy for him to allow the real estate agents to believe that they had gathered the necessary documentation and there was no need to go through all the paperwork. Thanks to this power, he secured lodgings for his companions who had not been dispatched by the USNA (including himself). Using common sense like "it's impossible for demons to exist", DD manipulated eyewitness memories and hid his companions' movements.

However, starting one week ago, his companions in the hotbed of activity began to lose their hosts one by one, necessitating a change. In order to help his companions dodge the physical examinations, he interfered with the USNA personnel's memory to transfer them to the back of the line and used that time to contact his companions who fled the country ahead of the military to Japan to help them coordinate lodgings and the next hideout.

After taking care of the luggage in the apartment, DD contacted his companions.

(Preparations for the move have been completed.)

DD directed this comment towards the inner part of his consciousness and received a mental confirmation. Even with a practitioner skilled in reading minds present, the only thing that could be heard was probably the sound of a bee flapping its wings. This wasn't even a question of language because DD was the only one communicating in a human language. Parasites communicated mentally, so there was no need for words. In the first place, they were similar to having one central consciousness. There was no need for everyone to consider the next step. With the companions responsible for cognitive thinking temporarily without a host right now, DD was the primary consciousness – the one responsible for human thinking.

(Then let's set off tomorrow morning. Please take heed not to draw attention to yourselves.)

(…………)

(It's already really late at night. Moving now would only increase the risk.)

The thoughts that came back were three in the affirmative, two in disagreement, and another that was a death cry.

"What's going on!?"

DD couldn't help but leap to his feet and use his real voice to shout. His "voice" traveled through the link between his eyebrows so that every one of his companions could hear him.

Yet, what came back was a stream of death cries. Almost at the same time, his companions' links were also disappearing.

By the time the fourth person cried out, DD felt a deep worry pervade his heart.

He frantically searched his own chest.

Near the heart area, a small black needle-like object was stuck. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be some sort of pin worn on the chest. The tip of the pin penetrated the clothing but drew no blood.

Rather than considering why he had been pierced by such an object, DD reflexively tried to pull it out.

Yet, his hand was no longer obeying his thoughts. The moment after DD consciously realized he had been pierced, his entire body was overcome with pain that broke his ability to think clearly.

The pain pierced his heart and his physical body forever suspended that function.

His cause of death was shock. The coroner's report would probably read "heart attack due to irregular shock".

Up until the end, DD was wholly unaware of the dark silhouette standing before him.

"Two seconds…… It's quite difficult to match Oji-sama."

Picking up the fallen pin from the floor, Kuroba Mitsugu mocked himself with his murmurs.

The magic Mitsugu used to bury the vampires was of his own devising. Bearing the tasteless name "Poisoned Bees" that he applied himself, it was a sensory interference spell that increased the target's pain perception infinitely until death. In this regard, if the target was someone who had a high pain threshold and was able to employ Counter Magic before the shock led to death then the spell would unravel, and there wasn't any effect on opponents who could cut off their pain sensors. In terms of killing power, this paled in comparison to the "Reaper's Blade" created by his uncle, Yotsuba Genzou, the head of the Yotsuba Family two generations ago. The mutters that leaked out of his mouth showed that Mitsugu was aware of this himself.

Still, it was premature to say that "Poisoned Bees" was magically inferior to "Reaper's Blade". The greatest advantage to "Poisoned Bees" was its ability to finish an opponent with the tiny prick of a pin. On the other hand, "Reaper's Blade" required personal delivery to ensure death, leaving behind wounds on a corpse and blood splatter everywhere. In comparison, "Poisoned Bees" would only leave behind a nondescript wound that would be hard to link to the cause of death. When faced with a victim of "Poisoned Bees", the initial assumption would be poison, then maybe death by suffocation, but the corpse would leave behind no evidence to support either hypothesis. For assassination purposes, "Poisoned Bees" was superb magic.

Another asset to "Poisoned Bees" was that this magic wasn't restricted to Mitsugu alone. Unlike most sensory interference magic, "Poisoned Bees" had an Activation Sequence that wasn't caster specific with a well streamlined process. In short, even Magicians other than Mitsugu were capable of using this magic. Naturally, this would require a degree of acclimation, but now all of the Kuroba agents employed "Poisoned Bees" as their trump card.

Hearing someone call out to him from behind, Mitsugu slowly turned around. His posture with one hand holding onto the formal hat on his head was obviously the byproduct of reading too many novels (in his subordinates' opinion). Still, he seemed perfectly at ease while acting in character.

"Execution complete."

"Casualties?"

"None."

Mitsugu nodded in satisfaction at his subordinate's words. These were opponents that had greatly troubled the USNA's pursuit squads. He could be forgiven if he scored his subordinates a mite highly.

"This order came from the head of house. Don't be lax while chasing the information bodies that fled the hosts. There's nothing we can do about it if we lose them in the end, but they still need to be hounded to the best of our ability."

His subordinate gave off a peculiar expression after Mitsugu gave his orders. Should his naïve speech be categorized as being too lax or simply not strict enough with his subordinates? It was difficult to conciliate this image with his calm orders of mass assassinations or cold demeanor to decisively sacrifice his agents.

Kuroba Mitsugu was a hard man to understand.

With multiple masks in place, there was no way to catch his real side.

For that matter, it was very much in question whether he even had a "real side".

The longer one worked alongside him, the more this impression deepened.

Chapter 10

Lina had flatly dismissed any connection between the source of the leak of the micro-black hole experiment and the humanists.

Tatsuya had also judged Lina's conjecture to be correct.

Nonetheless, as if to mock both of them, the magician-discriminatory actions stemming from the humanists became a large wave and swept across the North American continent from the east to the west.

That the wave would soon engulf the world was only a matter of time.

Three months late into the actual season, 「Winter」 would soon arrive.

◇ ◇ ◇

It could conveniently be called diplomacy, on the same level as battleship diplomacy or 'behind closed doors' diplomacy.

The great alliances forming the balance of power in this era created the framework for diplomacy, making conferences and ceremonies the main style of diplomacy practiced; however, that did not mean battleship diplomacy and secret 'behind closed doors' diplomacy had disappeared. Ceremonies could not be successful without secret 'behind closed doors' diplomacy to do the preliminary arrangements; those who participated in this transformed their status from the ornaments of diplomacy to the craftsmen of diplomacy, who secretly maneuvered the present world.

In any era, in any nation.

The seeds of conspiracy couldn't be eradicated from this world.

Tonight is no different.

In this nation as well.

"…For Pete's sake, this group of fanatics is incorrigible."

"Hahaha… It's easy to get groups like that moving, but taking the reins is difficult."

Two middle aged men, separated by a table, were sitting across from one another wearing suits as could be expected, but the man plying the other with sake was of European descent, not Asian.

Perhaps he had been in Japan for a long period of time, or maybe it was just a matter of taste, or maybe it was a product of his education, but he gracefully poured the transparent liquid from the bottle into a small bowl; in short, he was pouring into sake cups while obeying all the proper etiquette for sake drinking.

"When I re-examine it, I find it truly mysterious that this high quality sake — what's it called, this sake called Seishu… despite not being distilled, has no color and is so clear."

Flawlessly, he did not forget to interject some flattery concerning the other's country.

"No, no, compared to wine's vivid red and floridity, it is undeniably inferior. Of course, I intended to only prepare things that satisfied your preferences."

The one who had been complimented did not forget to show modesty.

What these men had in common was that they would never show what they really thought.

"That is the truth… it's so comfortable that I almost decided to get drunk, but since the fanatics I mentioned never run out of lawless things to do, I cannot afford to take it easy."

"I cannot thank you enough for the special consideration that you have given to the safety of my compatriots during our stay in your country in this regard."

There was no change in their voices. The slight smile on their faces remained the same. Nonetheless, if someone had been sharing the same space as these two, that person would have been aware of a strange atmosphere from the beginning.

"No, no, it's a natural courtesy. Since the fanatics you mentioned cannot be reasoned with… For example, no matter how much we explain it to them, they will not listen to the fact that the blast that destroyed the Asian Alliance Armada is the product of scientifically organized magic and not the work of a demon."

"'They won't listen to us' is not an excuse when you can't protect foreign visitors under your care from harm… you have my sympathies."

The two men tilted their bottles toward each other and gulped from their sake cups simultaneously, as if they had planned it.

"You might take this as mere bellyaching when you hear it, but if I could give them at least a general outline of the 'Great Bomb', then I think I could get them to settle down."

"…You might also take this as mere bellyaching when you hear it, but the military is maintaining its grip on all information regarding the weapon used on the southern tip of the Korean peninsula. No matter how confidential it is, civilian control is a basic democratic principle… why are the soldiers being so stubborn about it?"

The instant their eyes met, sparks flew; the next instant, both their faces had vacuous eyes and smiles on them.

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"Everything is as you heard just now."

Fujibayashi stopped the playback of the recorded conversation and lifted her head.

"Lately, even our diplomats seem to be giving their all. As expected, they are probably able to comprehend the importance and rarity of the 'Strategic Class'."

"What else?"

Fujibayashi tilted her head and looked inquiringly at Tatsuya, who was hesitating to say something, in order to press him to continue.

"…Besides, I believe it involves the honor of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Three years ago, we underwent a one-sided invasion; they were slathered with the slur of 'coward' throughout Japan, despite the fact that they were working desperately to reach a non-military resolution — efforts that have been made to look foolish."

"The Asian Alliance's actions did that…?"

Explaining this to Fujibayashi was 'like lecturing to Buddha', but it appeared that Miyuki wasn't getting it.

Well, even Tatsuya had enough common sense to recognize that this should be considered a normal level of comprehension.

"Japan and USNA are allied nations, but at the same time, with regards to the North Pacific area, they are potentially rival nations. If Japan became moderately weaker, the USNA would reap benefits."

Seeing that Miyuki had made a small nod of agreement, Tatsuya continued.

"On the other hand, although the Asian Alliance is a large nation, it doesn't have the power to go head to head with the Japan-America alliance. Additionally, they are not in such a bad state internally that they would need to make a gamble of this level. —So then, why did the Asian Alliance recklessly invade Yokohama?"

Tatsuya paused his explanation in order to give Miyuki time to think. He did not want his sister to become nothing more than a pretty air headed 'puppet'.

"The Asian Alliance does not have the power to take on Japan and America at the same time… Although Japan is an ally of America, they think it would be better for them if Japan became a little weaker than it is now…"

During her monologue, Miyuki silently made an "aha" as she grasped the concept.

"Unbelievable… the Asian Alliance and the USNA were secretly working together?"

Tatsuya's satisfied smile said, "Well done" and Fujibayashi, who was watching both of them, sported a wry grin.

"Working together might be too strong a term, but I think the likelihood that there was some form of complicity going on is extremely high."

Tatsuya turned his eyes in Fujibayashi's direction, and her wry grin disappeared with a slight nod of agreement.

"For example, something like the USNA intentionally delaying the dispatch orders to its Pacific fleet regarding the Asian Alliance's military invasion."

Fujibayashi's response to Tatsuya's conjecture was a positive one.

"Perhaps the Asian Alliance's military objectives were not occupying territory and destroying government facilities; isn't it more likely that their objectives were to kidnap technical experts and plunder technology?"

"That could be true. If you take the place and military power into consideration, then they could not have hoped to have greater results than that. Until they reached the point of mobilizing their fleet, I believe that they were prepared for tactical failure. As a result, they felt it was alright to take on a hornet's nest."

"As they say, the bird that doesn't make noise doesn't get shot. If you scare a snake by poking a bush, then you will get hurt — naturally I mean our side."

Tatsuya kept his poker face, but,

"The opinion of the one who is the most involved in this matter is expected to be packed with a lot of emotion."

Apparently Fujibayashi was not going to let him get away with it.

"Well then… it is about time I took my leave of you. No matter how much we call it 'a pre-recruitment interview', it is unnatural for a soldier to spend so long in a civilian household on a Sunday."

"Thank you very much for giving us your time today."

Tatsuya got up at the same time as Fujibayashi in order to convey his gratitude to her.

He was not trying to make a point or be modest. Although he himself was unaware of it, the thought of "Miyuki is entertaining so I should not stint on any form of courtesy" was running through Tatsuya's mind.

As he escorted her to the door, Fujibayashi thrust her hand into her bag while saying "Oh, yes." Actually, she did not really remember just now; naturally, this was just an act.

What she took out was a small, beautifully wrapped box.

"Here, it's two days early but it's your courtesy chocolate[1]."

"Courtesy, is it?"

She had been completely honest about her lack of time.

Calling it courtesy chocolate was enclosing it in a joke, but Tatsuya knew quite well that Fujibayashi was not the type to cut corners, so this was not a convenient mistake.

"Are you unhappy that it's courtesy?"

Fujibayashi laughed mischievously.

For an instant, Miyuki's eyes were tinged with a sharp light,

"No, stop kidding around."

But as Tatsuya replied promptly, the light completely disappeared as if it had been an optical illusion.

The bubbling voices of young women could be heard as they exchanged parting courtesies together on the way to the closed door, but the siblings returned to the living room with faces that said nothing had happened.

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There was a strong impression that the war which changed borders (the Third World War) had completely changed the cultural trends in this country.

Nonetheless, the truth was that it had not produced that great a change; numerous so-called 'superficial' customs had failed to become obsolete.

One of them, Valentine's Day, was scheduled for tomorrow. Essentially, comments like 'St. Valentine's Day' are not supposed to be so superficial; chocolate and presents are nothing but a plot by the candy companies, and the rest lacked the persuasion power necessary to kill the custom. While well aware of those things, the young engaged in their personal dance.

Tomorrow would be Valentine's day, and its frivolous ambience would permeate the First High School campus all day long. In this matter, magicians (to be) were also normal young girls.

"…Mitsui-san, it's alright to stop for the day, really."

After school, in the student council room.

For some time, the error bell had been repeatedly going off.

Azusa was not irritated with Honoka, who had set it off again; she had spoken those words because she was concerned that Honoka might be sick in some way.

"That's right, Honoka. It's better if you leave for the day already."

The one who made that assertion with her clear blue eyes clouded was Lina, who had been roped into being a temporary Student Council officer. Lina's real identity was hidden from ordinary students like Azusa and Isori, but she couldn't help being audacious.

-It was clear to even Honoka, herself, that it was best in these circumstances if she left; however,

"No, I'm fine."

While she was clearly showing that she was in a bad state, Honoka firmly made that answer.

…Since she was aware of the cause of her poor condition, she was embarrassed about them indulging her out of concern; for that reason, the persistent girl knew she gave off the mistaken impression of overexerting herself due to extreme feelings of duty, which made them worry more and made her feel worse.

"Mitsui-san, I think it is a fine thing that you are so responsible, but it is not wrong for you to rest."

Even though she was being spoken to like that by Isori, Honoka would not say "Okay, I'll rest" yet until Miyuki dealt her the knockout punch.

"Honoka, it is really better that you don't overexert yourself. No matter how hard you try, you are not really getting any work done today, are you?"

Miyuki also, on the surface, wore an extremely concerned face. As the girl whose mysterious beauty tended to make you forget she was human made that look while giving out the truth, Azusa, Isori and Lina were left with nothing to do but nod "That's right."

Nonetheless, Honoka was aware that Miyuki had figured out the reason for her 'poor condition', so to her, this was an extremely distressing comment. Especially the "you are not really getting any work done today" part.

"I see… Um. Then…"

After displaying that slight hesitation, Honoka enthusiastically stood up and energetically bowed.

"I am truly sorry! Please forgive me for leaving early today. Then from tomorrow onward, I will once again work hard!"

"Yes, we will work hard tomorrow."

Miyuki gave her reply to Honoka, forestalling (disregarding) any answer from the two senpai. Azusa felt that there was something strange about Honoka not using 'also' to indicate the effort put into today's work was the same as the effort she intended to put into tomorrow's work, but only Honoka, herself, could understand what she meant by that.

As she bowed her head and asked to be excused, Honoka's face had red-stained cheeks as she abruptly left.

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"…Honoka left early for that reason."

Miyuki explained that to Tatsuya as they took the road from the school to the station.

"Oh… Maybe she's getting ready for tomorrow."

"Unmistakably."

Miyuki nodded, extremely sure, and Tatsuya's face started to look as if he was feeling very uneasy.

"Since Honoka is the type to put a lot of effort into things like this…"

"Are you happy, Onii-sama?"

She was not feeling jealous — Miyuki was questioning him in a teasing tone; not really in the mood to be teased, Tatsuya shrugged in answer.

"Rather than feeling happy, I feel guilty. Even though I can give her material things in return, I can't give her the most critical thing in return."

Miyuki made a show of shyly grabbing Tatsuya's sleeve as he whispered to her in a somewhat serious tone of voice.

"…Please, don't trouble yourself about that. Both Honoka and I just want Onii-sama to be happy with all our hearts."

"…Really?"

"Really, it's okay to accept her gift without protest."

"Umm, I'm sorry to bother you just as you were getting in the mood, however..."

Tatsuya, with Miyuki still clutching his sleeve, turned to look at Lina, who had hesitantly interrupted them; although she sounded more irritated than embarrassed, reluctance was displayed on her face.

"Mood? You are uttering peculiar things, Lina."

"The peculiarities are in your heads!" is what she wanted to assert loudly, but applying verbal brute force would not win against Tatsuya anyway, as she had already found out.

"In short, Honoka's condition was bad because she was worrying about giving Tatsuya chocolate tomorrow?"

"You've grasped it quite well, Lina. Giving chocolate is a custom unique to Japan, I believe."

Lina had been looking at Tatsuya's face when she asked the question, but Miyuki answered as if it was perfectly natural for the reply to come from her. …This could not be said to be the first time it happened, so Lina had already stopped thinking "these siblings are doing it again" when Tatsuya didn't answer the question.

"That not true. 'Girls giving chocolate for Valentine's Day' is a famous Japanese cultural tradition. Even in the States, a lot of girls copy it, and I have heard about it from some of my classmates aside from Miyuki."

Lina dealt with Miyuki's reservations by giving her a somewhat tedious answer.

"Hmmmm… who are you going to give chocolate to, Lina?"

"Even you are asking me that question, Miyuki…?"

It could be deduced from the disagreeable scowl that Lina had been asked that question persistently by a lot of people. Although it might take different forms, this kind of curiosity was the same as a hundred years before and make no mistake, it will not change in another hundred years.

"I don't plan on giving anyone chocolate."

"Oh my, not even courtesy chocolate? Or is it possible that you weren't told about courtesy chocolate?"

"I know the general details of courtesy chocolate."

"Then, wouldn't you make a lot of people happy if you give it to them, to the people who helped you when you started to study abroad and others like that?"

Lina lightly glared at Miyuki's face. However, she was not able to read anything but mild curiosity from Miyuki's expression.

"If I gave people presents from me, personally, various problems would break out."

"That's it? Popular people have it tough."

Lina's breath stopped in her throat at Miyuki's mutter.

She felt like Miyuki's popularity exceeded even Miyuki's power, but she recognized that was a paranoid delusion.

"If we are talking about popular people, aren't you even more popular, Miyuki? Who are you going to give chocolate to, Miyuki? You're going to give Tatsuya your 'I love you' chocolate, right?"

That Miyuki would bestow true love chocolate on Tatsuya was obvious, so go ahead and speak of your love for him to the utmost, because I am going to tease you so bad, thought Lina, but…

"What are you saying, Lina? Onii-sama and I are siblings. It would be weird if I gave my older brother 'I love you' chocolate, right?"

"…"

I didn't say anything because I had decided not to say another word, right… Lina whispered in the depths of her heart.

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"…Psst, psst, Izumi, what do you think Onee-chan is doing?"

"I think that… she's making chocolate?"

"Then… what's up with the creepy laughter…?"

Currently in their third year of middle school, Saegusa Kasumi and Saegusa Izumi, twin daughters of the head of the Saegusa Clan, were quietly whispering into each other's ears at the entrance to the kitchen.

"She looks like… she's happy. Sort of."

"But, isn't that a little wrong?"

In front of the pair's eyes, Mayumi was happily double boiling bars of chocolate. However, even if they described her as happy, the smile on her face was definitely not the kind that belonged on the face of a young maiden in love on the night before Valentine's Day.

"…Who do you think she is going to present it to?"

The tone of Mayumi's laughter had already gone from "uhuhuhuhu," passing through "HuhHuhHuhHuhHu…" and the rest and was now close to becoming something like "KukKukKukKukKukKu…" As the person who resembled their elder sister acted as if she was plotting to poison someone, the twins looked at each other with faces drained of color.

"Kasumi-chan, about the chocolate that Onee-sama is using, is that…"

"Aah, oh yes… that's the stuff that's ninety-five percent cacao with zero percent sugar…"

In the past, products that stated that they contained ninety-nine percent cacao had been available for purchase, but what was currently available commercially was the strongest, bitterest chocolate, and that was what Mayumi was using as an ingredient.

"Over there, that bag…"

"It's espresso powder…"

"Onee-chan, what kind of awful…"

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An incredibly heavy burst of Psions arrived in the Information Dimension and quickly crashed into an isolated Information Body.

"You are only doing so-so today, so why don't we cut off this morning's session now."

"…Thank you."

As Tatsuya adjusted his breath and directed a bow towards Yakumo, Miyuki rushed up to him to hand him a towel.

Despite it being midwinter, there was a large quantity of sweat on Tatsuya's forehead. After spending some time being lost in watching Tatsuya wipe the sweat off, Miyuki started a conversation with Yakumo.

"Sensei, I think Onii-sama is extremely exhausted from using Gram Demolition…"

Yakumo caught Tatsuya's eye as he was about to answer the question himself, then shook his head to indicate that it was alright.

"Some exhaustion can't be helped. Since for Tatsuya-kun, the Information Dimension holds concepts of things that did not originally exist, 'Movement' and 'Exclusion'."

Since Monday of last week, Miyuki had demurred with "I would be a hindrance" and had not watched the training. Because today was Tuesday, it had been a week and a day since Miyuki had come. Therefore, although Miyuki knew Tatsuya had proposed "How about we try to work out some new magic that will work against the Parasite," (as Miyuki was agitated that Yakumo was the one he made the proposal to) she hadn't known what they had come up with until she had asked Yakumo. Even though they called it new magic, it looked like nothing more than simply practicing using Gram Demolition in the Information Dimension to Miyuki.

"That's …something that is produced as a byproduct of arranging, right?"

She was confident that her brother was the strongest magician, but she knew there were a lot of things that he couldn't do. If it were necessary to secure victory, her brother would let his heart and body be damaged, for example — shortening his life span — and she intended to use anything, even tears, to quickly stop him from doing that.

"No, I don't think it's that kind of thing."

Yakumo's answer quickly contradicted Miyuki's theory.

"Because only Tatsuya-kun's recognition method is changing. He is not directly hitting the target; he is establishing coordinates by making marks from one second to thirty-two minutes from the side of the target, and he is producing a concept bullet that will give him the exclusion of movement in an area he has subconscious dominion over that he connects to the real world — right, Tatsuya-kun?"

"That's what we're doing, Miyuki. Rotating back and forth between thinking and sensing makes me mentally… no, it only exhausts my sensitivity. Don't worry, I won't do anything that would make me fall victim to a side effect."

"Really…"

Miyuki appeared reassured by Tatsuya's clear explanation.

"So, there is a good chance of making a means to attack the Parasite?"

Upon being gazed upon by his younger sister with glittering eyes that said "just what I would expect from Onii-sama," Tatsuya unintentionally made a pained smile.

"No."

"If he goes up against a 'child' who has just been born, he will probably destroy him. But it would be tough to go up against an 'adult' fortified with months and years of experience."

Tatsuya let out a pained laugh as he shook his head.

Yakumo intervened and lowered her expectations slightly.

—Thanks to that, the siblings ended the session without awkwardness.

Miyuki had not accompanied Tatsuya this morning on a whim, much less to check on the progress of Tatsuya's training.

Miyuki had come to Yakumo's temple on the morning of February fourteenth last year and the year before, so this was the third time.

She probably didn't have to state her errand.

When they returned to the temple priest's quarters, Miyuki took out a pretty package from the bag she left there and presented it to Yakumo.

"Sensei might consider this a heathen custom, but please accept this. Sensei is always doing so much for my brother."

As she did this, Yakumo made a smug smile.

"No no, good things are steadily maintained, even if they're foreign heathen customs."

Surely Tatsuya wasn't the only one thinking "Every year, he says the same thing, this guy…"

"Master, everyone's watching."

However, Tatsuya was the only one who could give him a chiding look rather than merely keeping his face unnaturally stiff.

"Hm? Isn't it alright? It's an incentive to train you."

Naturally, Yakumo didn't act like he noticed Tatsuya disapproval at all.

"Doesn't this touch on the precepts on worldly desires?"

"As long as it doesn't end in carnal desire, it doesn't matter."

Yakumo spoke as if he was aloof from the world, but the avarice on his face didn't suit his words.

As Tatsuya shrugged "there's nothing that can be done with this man," the number of disciples who silently agreed with him was close to a majority.

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Until half a century ago, a large number of people used electric cars for transportation, but the modern era's cabinet had won on the point of ability to estimate arrival times.

If the method of how they're used is considered, the reason why can be understood, but cabinets do not have what is called an arrival time table. Naturally, in order not to cause any congestion, there is a wide window for cabinet arrival without being late. The lack of legally imposed speed limits within a cabinet's route forms the basis for fast arrival times. Though it can be said that it was a little inconvenient for meeting at a prearranged time and place.

In the first semester, Tatsuya and his friends had met at the station and joined the flow going to school together many times, but recently their pattern had been to congregate when they arrived in their classroom.

"Good morning, Tatsuya-san."

"Morning, Honoka."

This defiance of the difficulty, could it possibly be due to being young.

Or perhaps it was due to being in love.

Maybe both answers were correct.

"Ah, good morning, Honoka-san."

"Morning, Mizuki."

And for a maiden in love on this day alone, companions are intolerable. Since being with Miyuki was the default, nothing could be done about that, Honoka thought.

However, anyone other than Miyuki was not a friend but a mere obstacle. No, it was because they were friends that Honoka thought she wanted them to make assumptions based on what today's date was.

—Certainly, that thought showed on her face.

It could be said that Mizuki read the mood by the slight change in Honoka's expression.

Mizuki quickly started fidgeting. Although she was extremely uncomfortable, it would be too unnatural to suddenly burst out words like "I'll go on ahead" or "I remember I have to be somewhere" right now.

Even though she wanted to align with Honoka's expectation, in that situation Mizuki couldn't move; unexpectedly(?), Miyuki was the one who abolished the stalemate.

"Mizuki, is there something on your uniform?"

"Eh?"

Of course, upon suddenly being told that, Mizuki craned her neck with all her might, trying to look over her shoulder to see her back.

There was no way doing such a thing would allow someone to see their own back and since there was nothing back there in the first place, it was nothing but an exercise in futility, however—

"Stay. I'll get it for you. Onii-sama, I'm sorry, but please go on ahead. Honoka, could you go on ahead too?"

"Oh, I understand."

Honoka looked awestruck by this unexpected development; Tatsuya nodded easily and Honoka nodded at his look.

Honoka awkwardly forced her legs to trail after Tatsuya's back and turned only her upper body to thank Miyuki with her eyes.

Miyuki nodded with a small smile.

Honoka's nervousness and excitement over the unimaginable chance to walk to school with only the two of them knew no bounds. Even though Tatsuya made conversation, she was only able to make the proper responses by the skin of her teeth. Additionally, her voice was hoarse. In spite of Tatsuya walking rather slowly, her legs had difficulties due to joint stiffness, and she nearly stumbled over spots where there was nothing to stumble over.

Even if she was the only one who called it stage fright, it was the unmistakable truth.

If they entered the school building like this, the difference of status between the first course and second course students would part them. Honoka also understood very well that this incredible chance was also about to be wasted.

Not using the salt you were given was nothing more than betraying yourself to your rivals.

"Um, Tatsuya-san!"

Just as they passed the school gate, Honoka called for Tatsuya to stop.

"Would it be alright if I could have a moment of your time!"

The way she spoke was like she was standing on ceremony with a superior officer several ranks above or an upper level manager several classes above her.

"Fine."

Not even the least bit of surprise showed on the humbly smiling face that had stopped for her as Tatsuya nodded.

"Over here… please."

Stealthily, as if hesitant to attract people's eyes (which made her stand out), Honoka advanced on quick feet in the direction of the outer garden, Tatsuya following at a pace that was neither faster or slower. —With a face that said he knew all.

"Well, Tachu…!"

The private spot on the school grounds (it made a passable confession spot) she knew of was in the shadow of a tree behind the robot research garage. (However, there was no special legend attached to it.)

Honoka stood in front of Tatsuya, vigorously presenting a small wrapped box held steadily in both hands — with all her heart and fumbling her words.

Honoka froze in that position.

Her long hair, fastened in two ponytails above her neck, did not conceal her burning red ears. Her head hanging down showed off the part in the middle of her hair, that little slice of skin displaying the fact that she was completely red.

She couldn't make the slightest movement. She also couldn't speak. She could neither advance or retreat. Both of her arms trembled weakly, her heart throbbed loudly. Other places on campus were producing similar ripples but the waves produced from her heart were as strong and big as anyone else's. The form of the wave was pretty and unbundled like the ping produced by a tuning fork. —Guiding the bud of an ego of a trembling soul with no heart.

"Thank you, Honoka."

From both of the stretched out hands of Honoka, who was strangled by her own passion and unable to move, Tatsuya gently disconnected the wrapped box of chocolate to prevent it from breaking. And in exchange, installed a slightly smaller gift bag in the palm of her hand to grasp.

The uncertainty over the unexpected action might have (temporarily) overcome her shyness; Honoka pulled the gift bag to her breast with a blank expression on her face.

"Uh, Tatsuya-san, this…"

"For the time being, a return gift. Since I'll give you something different next month[2], that one you'll have to wait for."

Honoka wiped the tears out of her eyes in confusion as she steadily opened her eyes and clumsily smiled.

"Uh, um, I never thought… Uh, Tatsuya-san, is it alright if I opened it?"

"Of course."

Honoka stared at the present she took out of the bag as if afraid that it would cease to exist.

"…Honoka, don't you have to get to class soon?"

Until Tatsuya spoke to her, Honoka had kept standing stock still.

Tatsuya had paid attention to make certain no one eavesdropped or spied upon them. That being said, he had not gone as far as using Elemental Sight. He did not risk the damage of the discovery of a highly confidential skill for Valentine's Day.

However — Tatsuya should have used Elemental Sight.

Certainly, there were no signs of an eavesdropper. Since until just before now, that thing had not possessed consciousness.

Within a nook in the garage built on the grounds of First High, that thing that was slumbering within the doll without a heart was stirred awake by a wave that resembled the one that had drawn that thing into this world.

The word awake might invite slight misconceptions.

Bathed in a strong pure thought that resembled a prayer, a new self sprouted in that thing.

Reconstructed the self is probably a more accurate way of saying it.

Within that thing residing inside the doll with no will of its own, a consciousness was born.

A consciousness resided in the doll.

When Honoka arrived at the class room, as soon as she put her things down she rushed into the restroom.

Dragging along Miyuki who had arrived slightly before her.

Her goal was not the private stall but the mirror in front of it.

She impatiently took off the bands that tied up her hair, then in a complete change, she carefully collected her hair.

And used the pair of bands she had just received from Tatsuya as a finishing touch. The bands were of a simple design with two small balls hanging down from the closure. However, even though the design was uncomplicated, it didn't mean that it was made from cheap materials. Not only was the loop for tying the hair rubber, a covering had been molded on to the loop, and the form of the silver colored closure had thin claws grasping balls that were spheres of highly pure crystal.

Rather than being a decoration, crystal was recognized in modern times as a valuable medium that assisted magic (as it was said to effectively enhance the directionality of thought waves). As Magic High School students, the girls naturally had a deep interest in such minerals, and Honoka understood its value. She would have been very happy with a present from Tatsuya even if the balls had been cheap glass, make no mistake, so she was deeply moved.

"Hey, Miyuki, how do they look? Is it strange? Do they suit me?"

Honoka questioned, with slight unease, the hair ornaments held in both hands.

Miyuki answered seriously with no trace of amusement or disgust.

"Be at ease Honoka, they suit you quite well."

"…Really?"

"It's the truth. There's no way Onii-sama could possibly choose an unsuitable gift."

Honoka nodded, blushing in response to Miyuki's words.

With her head in the clouds, Honoka did not notice that Miyuki's voice had an aura of someone reading a script.

After parting from Honoka during the short distance to his own classroom, Tatsuya battled the feelings of self-hatred that welled up in him. The feelings of guilt caused by the actions that seemed to deceive the girl and the regret for making his sister an accomplice to that caused pain in his heart like that of a gradually widening cavity in a tooth.

To tell the truth, the hair ornament he'd given Honoka had been chosen by Miyuki.

If that was all it was, he would let it go as "the end justifies the means." It wouldn't change the fact that it was a 'present from Tatsuya', and it was definitely not necessary to disappoint Honoka.

However, the reason for preparing the present was not such an innocent one as that.

Tatsuya could comprehend just how thoroughly the gift he gave in thanks for the chocolate she gave him had unfortunately inundated her consciousness. The matter of giving and receiving Valentine's chocolate naturally invokes the images of 'feelings' being exchanged, of the relationship of two people being bound by a 'promise'; it is truly completely to be expected that such things would float to the surface of her mind.

That was the reason he prepared a return gift on this day; Honoka's reactions completely met Tatsuya's calculations.

Tatsuya had trifled with Honoka's affections.

He had resigned himself to accept the guilt a long time ago.

He couldn't do anything about the fact that he was a brute who couldn't comprehend human emotions, and even if he used social graces to deal with that or possibly even to receive retribution, he thought of it as reaping what he'd sown (if you didn't call it resignation but noncompliance, it would be completely correct).

However, even knowing his sister would never contradict something he had decided on, in order to postpone the inevitable, he made use of his sister in a makeshift ploy and he could not help but feel regret.

—The fact that he could think this way was proof that he was not as wicked as he thought himself to be; however, unfortunately, there was no adult around Tatsuya to tell him that.

"Hey, did something happen this morning — you look worn out."

He had probably not gained control of his emotions soon enough. Those words came at him the moment he entered the classroom.

Tatsuya raised his hand to also greet Leo, who had raised one of his hands while straddling his chair.

"You, on the other hand, look pretty healthy for someone who just got out of the hospital yesterday."

"Hey, you two, the a.m. greeting is 'Good Morning'."

With a laugh that said "there's no help for you two," Mikihiko came over to take part in the conversation.

"Ah, good morning Mikihiko."

"Yo."

Tatsuya obediently returned the morning greeting. Leo persevered in keeping to his own personal style — there was probably no deep meaning to this.

"Good morning. Leo, you look very much as you were."

When he said "as you were," Mikihiko meant "as usual," but,

"Right, the doctor really didn't want me to leave the hospital, but since I was too healthy, he couldn't do anything about it."

Maybe Leo understood and maybe he didn't, but he responded with an exact explanation as a reply.

According to that first medical examination, he should have stayed in the hospital for at least a month; that the doctor was quite skeptical about a rejuvenation power defying common sense was unavoidable, he thought.

However, since the doctor couldn't see anything wrong and the patient wanted to leave the hospital, the doctor could not detain him in the hospital room. For that reason, Leo came back to school today.

"Um, Tatsuya, did you have a fight with your sister this morning?"

"Impossible."

The statement was not Tatsuya's, but Mikihiko's.

He wasn't fully satisfied with the snap judgment, but he couldn't decide on an excuse that wouldn't lead to misunderstandings.

"Isn't it more likely that he's tired of the spectacle? Today's Valentine's Day."

Leo gave a big nod of agreement. That also grated on Tatsuya's nerves, but getting angry over it here would, unfortunately, get him bogged down in the subject.

"Those who have not decided on someone do not get caught up in the spectacle. Mizuki. You're late."

Tatsuya forcibly and very stupidly tried to use Mizuki, who had just entered the classroom, to blatantly change the subject.

"No, I just stopped by the clubroom for a bit. Good morning, Yoshida-kun, Leo-kun."

To be frank, Mikihiko looked regretful at the change of topic, but being completely unaware of that was one of Mizuki's idiosyncrasies.

"Leo-kun, you're resuming school today. You've gotten well quicker then I thought you would, great."

The truth was that Leo left the hospital yesterday and came to school today; last week, when they visited him in the hospital, they had heard the details of his condition, so naturally Mizuki was also aware of it.

Therefore, if it was true, the statements just now were bizarre, but Tatsuya, Mikihiko,

"Oh, thank you, for visiting me so often,"

and Leo himself, continued smiling.

As soon as Mizuki arrived at her seat, she passed a small, palm-sized box to each of the three of boys. Her attitude was truly light; she did not put on airs, she did not appear nervous, and she did not appear embarrassed in the least.

It was the face of someone taking part in an annual tradition.

One of the boys looked a little miffed about that, but since the other two received the impression that the person in question intended to endure it with a poker face, they said nothing.

The sympathy of warriors.

Incidentally, that person was not Leo.

However, he was gazing at the small box he received as if it was something amazing.

Apparently, this was the first time he had received chocolate on Valentine's Day from someone other than a relative.

That was fairly unusual, but they had no way of knowing what kind of student he'd been in his middle school years, so neither Tatsuya nor Mikihiko voiced their amazement.

Erika, who had just entered the classroom, interjected herself into the conversation.

"I thought you got out of the hospital real fast; so you were after the chocolate."

"There's no way that could possibly be true! Stop screwing around, you simpleton!"

Not simply retorting, Leo kicked his chair as he stood up.

"Ooh, could I have hit a bulls-eye?"

It was an absolutely adequate explanation for the extreme reaction, if it were looked at with those suspicions in mind. —If forced to come up with an explanation, however. If viewed literally, the sound Leo was unleashing, "Gunununununu," was a composite made from grinding his back teeth and growling. However, Tatsuya had been thinking it was the forerunner of retribution and was unable to leave things alone, so he threw his friend a lifeline and spoke to Erika.

"Good morning, Erika. You're late today."

Erika turned her entire body to respond to Tatsuya.

"Good morning, Tatsuya-kun."

Naturally, dropping the matter left Leo at a loose end.

"February the fourteenth, it's awful every year. Because we have a large number of guys."

Obviously, Erika preferred honestly grumbling over toying with Leo, and it appeared that her mind had shifted in that direction.

"If I don't give them any, it won't be just one or two who sulk like spoiled children, and that's not limited to the very skilled ones, so I can't ignore any of them; it's just awful."

She repeated awful twice, probably because her true feelings were that strong on the subject.

"Wouldn't it be better if you only gave to the ones who wanted it?"

"If I did that, there would be guys who would make a fuss over my playing favorites. And this is the only thing they're united on. Usually, the guys don't know the meaning of the word 'harmony'."

Erika was fed up to the bottom of her soul.

"Under the pretext of amity between the trainees, my old man puts up money for it; I really wish he would use it to buy us some female students instead."

The look on her face made Tatsuya feel like he should pretend to feel sympathetic.

"That really sounds like hard work."

"That's sure true! I'm so tired of it… It would be so much better if Valentine's Day and the like ceased to exist."

It seemed like stress was bursting out of her as she talked. Erika's indignation was real and extreme.

"It must be great at Miki's place."

At times like this, some people ran amok, striking at people near them to release their stress.

"Aren't most of your disciples female?"

The target she chose this time was Mikihiko.

"Every year, don't you take your pick?"

"Yoshida-kun… is that true?"

Mizuki did not really understand why she had said that herself.

Or rather, she was not conscious of that reason.

And on Mikihiko's side also, for some reason he did not consider probing why; he received more damage from that one line from Mizuki than Erika's needling.

"That's not true!"

Out of reflex, he responded with an answer.

If you considered the background a little, then you could quickly make a reasoned response that would take care of the various aspects of the conversation; however, that might be a little difficult for a teenager to do.

"In general, it would be ridiculous to undertake our discipline holding that frivolous attitude."

Even so, this outburst was quite foolish.

"Backtalk, huh. So why do you want to call my dojo frivolous?"

"Uh, no, I didn't mean to say that…"

"Then what did you mean?"

As Mikihiko began to burst out in cold sweat, Erika steadily glared in his direction and Mizuki looked at both of them with a similar stare for some reason, Tatsuya and Leo exchanged wry smiles.

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The curriculum of Magic High Schools was the same as a normal high school, with the addition of the study of magic. The modern education system supported a policy of advancing to specialized subjects in quick stages which was not limited to Magic High Schools. In practice, that meant there were 'Literary Arts High Schools', 'Science High Schools', 'Fine Arts High Schools', and 'Sports High Schools' to develop students with talents in specialized fields important to the education system. The curriculum of specialized high schools differed from normal high schools because part of the institutionalized integrated doctrine of education at a high school had been removed and the specialized educational subjects were jam packed. Nevertheless, it was said that even in comparison to other specialized high schools, there was even less give in the curriculum of Magic High Schools.

Consequently, Magic High Schools' students were industrious. While they were in the middle of lessons, they hardly ever gossiped, daydreamed or wasted their time in other ways, like playing. It was unfortunate, but it should probably be said that this practice was followed more by second course students than first course students at First High School. This was probably more due to their fear of being left behind than their fighting spirit to conquer adversity.

However, even here there were exceptions. Apart from the practical skills of magic, time had been set aside for normal physical education, wherein even the tense atmosphere loosened. Especially today, somehow no one could concentrate on their schoolwork from the morning onward on a day like February the fourteenth; the unpredictable ambience wafting throughout the day was that prominent.

Changing out of the female school uniforms took more labor than changing out of the male school uniforms. This was not limited to First High School alone, and was probably the same for every school. In the first place, the issue was not limited to uniforms. A portion of the advocates to abolish sexism demanded that there should be a cultural change to unisex attire and the like, but the majority of males and females did not wish to do so.

In the short break period before P.E. class, the atmosphere in the changing room was always saturated with busyness. Everyone was in a great hurry as they took off their clothes carefully, put them on a hanger in their lockers and then changed into their gym uniforms. More bio-keyed lockers had been prepared than there were people to use them, and they had to register the vein pattern of the user each and every time, so that also took up time.

That being said, by February, even the first years were used to it, so while their hands moved briskly, they could chat with their classmates using the locker next to them and also feel less ill at ease(?) with the underwear clad bodies of their classmates. The changing room was a degree noisier than usual today.

By this time of year, the locker positions were generally decided. Miyuki, as usual, was changing in front of her locker in the middle of the right wall. The one to her left was Honoka's and the one on her right was the one used by Shizuku; however, Class A had less members taking instruction than usual lately. Nevertheless, today Lina had come to take the place on Miyuki's right.

"Oh, Lina. Is your usual spot occupied?"

Miyuki asked this question as she finished stowing away her CAD and information terminal in a locker cubby. The locker Lina usually used was near the door. At first, all the Class A girls thought she would use Shizuku's locker, but Lina had chosen an open locker near the door where there weren't a lot of people. When Miyuki talked to Tatsuya about it, he had said "She probably chose a place she can make a quick escape from" and she had thought, "I see." There was no proof that Tatsuya's guess was correct. It could certainly be said that this was the first time Lina changed her clothes beside Miyuki.

"That's not the reason."

Miyuki did not ask what the reason was. She did not have any interest in the answer and had been busy taking off her jacket as Lina spoke.

Nonetheless, perhaps because she thought her answer just now was too unfriendly, Lina, of her own free will, added to her answer while stripping off her jacket as well.

"Everyone's asking who I am going to give chocolate to… I know no one's doing it out of meanness, but I've gotten a little sick of it."

"Everyone is wondering about it. Since you are so pretty, Lina."

Miyuki said that with a serious look while taking off her necktie; Lina puffed up her cheeks in frustration.

"Then why do I have to suffer a barrage of questions from you Mi…yuki."

The instant Miyuki extracted her bare right shoulder from the dress portion of her uniform, Lina had cut off her response mid-sentence. Lina's eyes were glued to this not very extraordinary deed and her tongue no longer functioned properly.

"Huh? I wonder if it's because I lack sex appeal."

Miyuki's remarks had made Lina irritable for some reason and she didn't know why. Lina was not aware that she was energetically stripping off her dress in a competitive fashion.

This time, Miyuki let out a sigh at Lina's half naked body that was emerging from underneath her uniform.

"Lina, your figure is so nice. I am envious."

There was no trace of timidity as she spoke, Miyuki was also only wearing her underwear.

"Is that sarcasm? In what way does Miyuki have reason to be envious of me?"

As she spoke, Lina, with her hands on her hips in an imposing pose, peered intently all over Miyuki's semi-nude body and got in Miyuki's face.

"After all, your hips and bottom are just the right proportions and extremely sexy. You're not thin, but extremely fit, Lina."

Miyuki reached out with her right hand and patted the narrowest part of Lina's waist. It was completely without lust, from a certain point of view; it was an innocent touch. Even though Lina knew that the touch was not accompanied by any lesbian lust, it was hard for her to retain her self-possession. The sound of someone swallowing their saliva could be heard here and there in the changing room; the scene probably threatened people's peace of mind even if they were only looking at it.

Of course, Lina was too busy to worry about the spectators.

"Mi-Miyuki, you..."

As she spoke, Lina reached out her hand. However, she hesitated just before she touched Miyuki's bare skin and drew her hand back.

"There aren't really any spots where you're too thin — your very womanly body makes me so jealous."

Miyuki sent a devilish little smile towards Lina, who couldn't handle being stared at and was turning red, and released her hand from Lina's hip.

Just then, a loud crash rang out behind Miyuki.

Miyuki turned around; Lina moved her eyes.

There they found that Honoka had lost the use of her legs and was clinging to her locker.

Somehow, Miyuki surveyed the area and became aware that her classmates had paused partway through changing their clothes and were now averting their red faces in an unladylike manner. Normally, Miyuki ignored anyone staring at her, so she had not been aware until now that they had drawn everyone's attention.

"…Why don't we change quickly."

In response to Miyuki's proposal,

"Yes."

Lina, who felt the same, nodded as well as she spoke her reply.

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Immediately after school, the capricious ambience flourished. During instruction, the students had probably practiced self-restraint. And now it seemed that they couldn't hold back any longer; scenes full of pain and pleasure that made you want to throw cold water on them unfurled here and there across the campus.

The situations varied.

For example, among his circle of friends, a slightly too potent scene of chocolate gifting unfurled between a betrothed couple, whose match was approved by themselves as well as by their parents. Apparently Kanon, the Public Morals Chief, invaded the Student Council Room, and used a smiling face to apply pressure on Isori, the Treasurer, to eat all of the homemade drops of chocolate in the nearly overflowing stenciled ornamental box the size of a female student's bento box.

For the next example, let's take the case of a certain shy but strong willed girl. Apparently, she had politely and solemnly disregarded her status as a second course student to overcome the lofty threshold of the first course classroom, in order to present her beribboned package with her face red and eyes cast down to a male student wide eyed with surprise when he received the gift, and even now looked like he was ready to dance for joy. So it was for people like the Kendo and Kenjutsu couple.

For today only, the students of First High were not 'magicians to be', but 'high school students' rejoicing in their youth.

Those who couldn't get into the festive atmosphere wanted to avert their eyes.

"Oh, Tatsuya, you're on patrol duty today."

A voice called out to him from a table with a look that didn't bother concealing the owner's boredom and search for amusement, sealing Tatsuya's fate by making it impossible for him to ignore this sight.

"All of the upperclassmen seem to have previous commitments, so it's just the first years today, Morisaki and I."

Normally, the thought that he had a compatriot would have probably made him feel a little better. However, since even now Morisaki had not dropped his unfriendly attitude, his arrival would only change his mood slightly.

"That's quite a tactful way of saying that they unloaded their duties on you and left."

"I did not intend to be that blunt."

The resignation in his voice was quite the opposite of the high pitched laughter made in response to it.

"By the way, Tatsuya-kun."

Perhaps she had enough of laughing for a while, thought Tatsuya when Mayumi called out to him. —For some reason he avoided looking at the seat across from her.

"Could I have a little bit of your time."

"That would not be a problem, but before that..."

As he spoke, Tatsuya cast his eyes on the upperclassman who had fallen prostrated on the side of the table across from Mayumi.

"What on earth happened here?"

The spot they currently were in was in a corner of the cafeteria, a line of partitions cordoning the meeting spaces in this area.

Since they had no roofs and no ceilings, the sound of conversation carried.

Still, the fact that it wasn't a quiet private space probably made it feel more secure than if it was.

The high popularity was actually only among the third years in the first course; it was rare for an underclassman to set foot here unless accompanied by a third year. Incidentally, Tatsuya also had not used it yet.

As for why he was here now,

"There shouldn't be any poisonous substances inside the school. What on earth did Club Management Group Leader Hattori eat?"

In the middle of his patrol of the school grounds, he had stopped by the café to quench his thirst when the sound of an extremely painful moan entered his ears, so he checked out that situation first.

"No. Well… not poison. Of course."

He soon realized who the culprit was.

After all, directly in front of Hattori, Mayumi sat with a perplexed look on her face.

Her slightly puzzled bearing could be called strange.

Even now, her gaze was inviting him to partake her hospitality.

"…Shiba…"

Tatsuya was still deciding on how to deal with the situation when Hattori, who still looked like he was about to faint, called out to him in a hoarse voice.

"…water…"

It was the voice of a traveler who had used up all his strength in front of an oasis.

"Just a moment."

Only the request was clear.

For an instant, he debated between getting mineral water and going to the water cooler, but he chose the water cooler since it was closer. He placed one of the water cooler cups full of cold water on the table.

Hattori clumsily grasped at the cup, sluggishly got his limbs moving, and aimed the cup in the vicinity of his mouth as he listed from side to side and guzzled it down in one gulp with a grimace.

He kept his eyes closed, slowly gathering himself; the clock ticked ninety-seconds off before Hattori opened his eyes again and gave a deep sigh.

"—Shiba, my thanks."

What could have really happened. The duel they had had in April had not made them enemies, but even now you could not call Hattori's and Tatsuya's relationship friendly.

Tatsuya did not harbor any grudge on his end.

Nor did Hattori carry any malice or hostility, although people do not always recognize the emotions they hold, but even so, the docility with which he was thanking Tatsuya created an unsuppressable sense of wrongness.

"…Are you okay?"

"…Hm, I'm okay now."

To prove his words, Hattori stood upright.

—The feeling that he was straining himself was undeniable.

"It is just a matter of time. Since no special problems should arise, you shouldn't worry about me. Well then, Presi-, no I mean Saegusa-senpai, I will be off."

Hattori politely bowed in Mayumi's direction and straightened his spine.

Wow, that is probably one big bluff, thought Tatsuya as he watched him.

"Umm, for the time being could you give me a moment?"

Mayumi directed Tatsuya into the chair, her smile laced with fake innocence.

The reason for Hattori's weirdness was unmistakably her; that she was trying to pretend otherwise was obvious, but he could see that it would be rude to expose her when Hattori himself was covering up for her.

Consequentially, Tatsuya forgot act one as Hattori wished him to.

Since he certainly didn't have anything that he had to do, Tatsuya nodded an "Understood" in response; however,

"Ah, he's here! Subaru, over here!"

The lively voice kept him from continuing.

The nimble galloping feet made a pitter-patter sound as they rushed to him.

They soon made it to Tatsuya's side and took what was probably their first look at the inside of the partition.

A sound like the squeal of brakes arose from the momentum as the voice's owner stopped.

"Pre-President..."

"Hey, Eimi, it's not president, it's Saegusa-senpai, right?"

A quick flick to the head, "Ouch!", sweetly settled Eimi down; Subaru avoided looking at Eimi's upturned gaze of protest and bowed deeply to Mayumi.

"I have no excuse that I can give you for the commotion just now."

The suggestive tone made Mayumi twitch around her eyes.

"It was not much of a commotion, so please do not bother worrying about it, Satomi-san."

The one who composed her face and answered so coldly was Mayumi.

To a normal underclassman, the words, the tone and the gaze would all be withering.

Currently, Eimi had stiffened slightly.

"Is that so? We will finish our errand quickly."

Nonetheless, Subaru was extremely determined.

As she calmly exchanged words, she handed the bag (a cloth bag to be exact) in her hand to Tatsuya.

"Will you please accept this from us?"

"…Satomi-san. Today, you're like you're in a high class play."

"I don't know what I've done to deserve it, but Eimi and I were chosen as representatives. As you might expect, we are, to be honest, slightly embarrassed to do this."

If you looked closely, her cheeks were slightly red.

Saying that she was embarrassed did not seem to be a lie.

"In that case, is it alright for me to ask who you are representing?"

He had a fair idea of how she would answer, but in order to buy himself some time to prepare, Tatsuya ventured a question.

"Most of our fellow members of the Nine Schools Competition first year girls team… well it's a thank you."

Subaru's choice of words was unusual but the definition was the same.

In short, courtesy chocolate, right.

Nevertheless, to receive it from the entire team was an unanticipated bounty.

"Ah, even though I said my fellow members, I did not include Honoka or Miyuki."

Now that she was no longer petrified, Eimi on the other hand did not look all that embarrassed. After all she did not originally have a very timid personality, plus she was probably (it was often said about her) fairly naïve about male-female relationships. In Eimi's case, she probably had too many other things to worry about.

"Since those two would probably wish to pass theirs themselves."

"If we interfered with that, they'd probably get angry."

"You could call it a replacement, but we included Shizuku instead. We'll call or email to tell her about her inclusion later."

"Well, see you later. President, no I mean, Saegusa-senpai, excuse us."

No one interrupted their goodbye.

After overwhelming Mayumi and Tatsuya with their whirlwind conversation, Subaru and Eimi departed.

"…What's the expression, it's good to be young?"

Perhaps the lively intruders had thrown her off her game, as the emotions Mayumi was radiating felt a little out of focus.

Of course, Tatsuya made no move to step into the minefield he saw lain out in front of him.

He silently took his place on the chair that Hattori had occupied a little while ago.

Simultaneously, Tatsuya reflexively lowered his eyebrows.

"Something wrong?"

"No, there's a slight smell… someone probably spilled coffee."

Was the strong odor assaulting his nose coming from coffee beans or cocoa beans. The cleaning robot was supposed to have a deodorizing mechanism, but… it could have deliberately cleaned it by hand.

—Tatsuya mused on one side of the table,

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

While Mayumi, who knew the truth, pretended she didn't know on the other side.

Naturally, calling her on it would be meaningless, however.

"More importantly, here."

After all, the same scent was drifting up from the box Mayumi presented as she spoke.

Of course, Tatsuya was aware of the scent. The thing that had dealt Hattori that damage was undoubtedly this, Tatsuya perceived. Tatsuya had intended to forget what he had seen a little while ago, but it seemed that Mayumi would not let it go.

"…This is?"

Considering the shape, the way it was wrapped and what day today was, it was obvious what the thing was, but even so, he couldn't help asking.

"Oh my, isn't it exactly what you think it is?"

Underneath the statement, voice and expression that all professed surprise, Mayumi was enjoying herself immensely.

"…Thank you."

Unfortunately, he did not have an excuse to refuse it.

If it weren't for the scene just now, he might have gotten by with the cliché "I dont like sweets," but that did not have any persuasive power after he just accepted a large quantity of chocolate from Subaru and her friends.

There was nothing he could do, so Tatsuya accepted Mayumi's chocolate.

It was very big.

From how it felt in his hand, it had five times the weight of commercial grade chocolate.

That allowed Tatsuya to take a rough guess that she had used high quality materials for what she was plotting. When and where did I earn your enmity, he thought, but he did not have a single clue to her motive; however,

"Hey, taste it."

He had anticipated this sort of statement from Mayumi.

"Right now?"

"Yes. I want to hear your impressions."

He did not say, why didn't you end your experiment with Hattori-senpai.

That saying anything like that was futile was obvious.

She probably wanted to see what kind of face he made right before her eyes.

I didn't know she could be so childish… as he thought so, Tatsuya began to unwrap it.

(Well, it's okay.)

There was a little something he wanted to ask Mayumi about just now. Because she was close to taking the university examinations she was preparing for, her time was limited and he had felt awkward about bothering her; however, if she intended to take the time to use him as a toy then he probably shouldn't worry about it.

"Then since there is a small matter I want to consult you about, may we change the location?"

He did not want ordinary people to overhear the discussion. Naturally, that was not the only reason he wanted to change the location. Even Tatsuya worried a little about his reputation. Collapsing from eating chocolate could never be called dishonorable, but he did think it was the type of embarrassment that people would bring up forever.

"It would be bad if we're overheard."

It seemed that Mayumi quickly understood one of his reasons.

The smile disappeared from her face. The transformation was so abrupt that he almost heard a ping when her expression changed.

"Yes."

"…Understood. Follow me."

She spent the time before she replied looking at the information terminal of her phone making arrangements. Perhaps she had pinpointed an empty classroom. A normal student wouldn't have been able to do it, but it wouldn't be strange if this upperclassman could do it.

Tatsuya took the box he had been given with him when he got up to pursue Mayumi, who had stood up from her seat.

He felt the gazes of well over ten people, but he had already decided not to worry about things that nothing could be done about.

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Mayumi used a disposable key code downloaded through her phone terminal to open the door to the room, which was one of the lounges used for interviews with guardians and merchants. It was not as formal as a reception room, but it still felt awkward to be using it as students.

It wasn't as if he never thought of asking if it were really okay to use the room, but it was probably too late to ask now since she had already downloaded the key code. There was a completely automatic tea server in place, so she had chosen a room that they could eat and drink in.

"Is black tea okay?"

"No, you needn't bother with it."

"Don't make me lose face as a lady."

Once she went to the length of saying that, there was nothing he could do but accept the tea.

Despite the fact that it was completely automatic, she did not use the paper cups that were dispensed. She placed tea cups underneath the selection spout and made the effort to make a place setting, complete with matching saucers.

Mayumi seemed to really enjoy the process.

"Here, please have some."

"Thank you."

From the moment he took his first polite sip from the cup, he corrected his seating posture.

Almost automatically, Mayumi also straightened her spine as she sat down.

"The subject you wanted to discuss, is it the 'Parasite'?"

The one who fired the first shot was Mayumi.

Perhaps she had also wanted to discuss the subject with Tatsuya.

"Yes, the information has not been released by the media, but is the damage calming down?"

Not only the media, but the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion's information routes had also abruptly stopped relaying damage reports.

It was simple if you thought about it; it made it look as if their extermination of the demon had cleared up all the problems. However, they had been able to confirm that the covertly operating demons had a multitude of forms. Not knowing if they had even been able to defeat the 'Vampire' despite its lack of substance, for that reason he did not consider the matter completely resolved.

"Officially, things are calming down."

Mayumi, or more precisely the Saegusa clan, possessed different information routes than Tatsuya. However, even she did not have details about the current situation.

"Although, since the number of missing people is more numerous this year compared to last year, I believe that we may interpret it to mean that they have gotten more skillful in their operations. Our vigilance might have allowed us to bring down one of our prey."

The conjecture was not Mayumi's alone; the Saegusa clan also found the facts strange. One week before, only a small portion of the people had been informed that all of the Parasites were said to have been temporarily exterminated.

Thus, the conversation being exchanged here between Tatsuya and Mayumi was truly off the mark in regard to the truth. However, that there was no way that the actual body of the parasite was destroyed and it would be revived in a new host sooner or later was close to the truth. Therefore, the sense of impending danger the two of them harbored was not something pointless.

"There is no way to be sure we brought it down, but perhaps we should be keeping a lookout. Maybe we should equip our allies with telepathy."

"Tele…pathy?"

The unfamiliar word stalling the flow of the conversation. Mayumi tilted her head, asking for an explanation.

"It is a term for the ability to share inspirations and perceptions. The phenomenon has been observed between identical twins; it is one of the numerous forms of Extrasensory Perception. Even though I said numerous, the examples of it are relatively rare, however."

"In short, something that can see and hear a portion of its body and allow the whole group to share that experience, is that what you mean?"

"It is nothing but conjecture."

Mayumi brooded with a glum face.

In order to not interfere with that, he drank his black tea without making a sound,

"…I don't like all these things we don't understand,"

but he could hear Mayumi mutter that.

Tatsuya completely shared that emotion, but if he voiced that, it would become a mutual gripe session. He thought that would be too detrimental.

"All we are doing is fumbling around, looking for a method of handling unknown situations."

Thus, when she spoke of things that they could not do anything about, he withheld any words of comfort.

"…"

Tatsuya also perceived that saying that it didn't have a physical body increased the discomfort they felt while examining the problem they were giving their complete attention to.

"…If we can't do that..."

Nevertheless, apparently Mayumi's attention was centered on a completely different purpose.

"I don't fully understand what you mean by the ability to share inspirations and perceptions, but hmm… hey, is there a created sequence for it?"

"…ESP is regarded as being attached to an entirely different field of study than magic research, so I think not."

The anxiety was heading toward a pinnacle.

How could they end their exchange of information on a good note — Mayumi summed up all she felt with a sigh. At that point, Tatsuya stood up intending to leave without eating anything, but the cuff of his sleeve was firmly grasped by a hand that reached out from the other side of the table. —If Tatsuya had thought to evade it, he would have been able to do so, but he restrained himself since Mayumi didn't need another poor result.

"Now, why don't we enjoy our tea time."

Tatsuya sent a distrustful stare (naturally, intentionally) against the iron wall of Mayumi's smile, and Mayumi lightly thrust the small box that had been placed on the table with her other hand.

It seemed that she was not going to be kind and forget about that.

So that's how it's going to be; Tatsuya let out a small sigh at Mayumi, who was no longer trying to conceal the fact that she was planning something.

No words of rebuke were let loose.

Quite the opposite, Mayumi was looking at Tatsuya with anticipation and excitement in her eyes.

Isn't she regressing back to childhood due to her anxiety over taking the university entrance exams? While he considered that impossibility (In the first place, Mayumi had no reason to be anxious about her grades), Tatsuya freed the box from the covering.

He did not do it in an overtly, slow, time-consuming way, but he politely peeled it off in a manner that did not damage one bit of the wrapping paper as a token form of resistance.

What came out was a cardboard box covered by a lid. The homemade Valentine's box had inner walls treated with vinyl; the largeness of the box made it one of the so-called 'to convey your true feelings' type.

Of course, he did not mistake it for that.

The atrocious combination of chocolate and coffee that made him light headed would not allow him to have that kind of delusion.

The inside of the box was packed tightly with black, cube shaped objects. They did not resemble anything Tatsuya recognized as 'chocolate'.

He had a forewarning of what it would taste like just from the odor.

No matter how much it is said that bitter things do not have to taste bitter, that is limited by quality and quantity.

Tatsuya resignedly put the objects that looked like they should be called medicine instead of food into his mouth and chewed them.

The results of this were — only recorded by Mayumi's smug smile.

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Honoka cut across the school yard toward the preparation room with a large notebook style terminal.

The sun was well on its way down, and the temperature had dropped several degrees. If she let her mind wander, her body will begin to shiver.

However, her mood was not affected by the cold.

Anything that tried to mar her day was brought to heel by her two swinging hair ties.

Her mind unintentionally drifted towards the crystal balls that shook with her.

She acknowledged to herself that she was wearing a stunned expression but she told herself again and again that "It was okay for today only."

Honoka was well aware that she was not Tatsuya's girlfriend.

She did not forget that her love confession had been refused.

She had already been rejected.

Even so, for as long as Tatsuya allowed it, she was going to keep clinging to him.

She sometimes felt that she was a 'wicked girl' for doing that.

There were also nights that she resented him for not cutting her loose after he rejected her.

However, today she felt like all those negative emotions had been blown away.

Logical thoughts, like this small accessory was too cheap a handout to make her this happy, were powerless in the face of these feelings.

"Honoka!"

As Honoka entered the preparation building with soft footsteps, a voice called out to her from the side and she halted her feet.

"Ah, Eimi."

The slight girl, who stood out due to her vibrant ruby like hair, rushed up to Honoka with quick feet.

"How unusual for you to come here, Honoka. Isn't it the first time we've seen each other since you've become a Student Council officer?"

"I'm standing in for Isori-senpai."

As she said that, Honoka lifted the notebook style terminal slightly to display it and Eimi gave a look of comprehension.

"What about you, Eimi; are you taking a break from your club?"

The uniform of the hunting club Eimi belonged to was supposed to be a long sleeved shirt under a short jacket, thin trousers and boots, but right now she was in her school uniform. And it was not yet time for club activities to be over.

"There was only a meeting today."

Since Eimi quickly understood that Honoka had asked the question because of the uniform, she did not inquire 'why' she was being asked.

"Hey? Is that crystal?"

She had not meant to ask another question, but the light flickering in Honoka's hair quickly caught her eye and she asked a question in a tone bursting with curiosity.

"Umm, yes."

The embarrassed expression might have set a bell ringing; Eimi grinned happily.

"You got that from Shiba-kun, right?"

"…Yes, he said it was a return gift for the chocolate."

The happiness of the blushing Honoka put a contagiously happy smile on her face, which was shown to the wide-eyed Eimi.

"Ooh… he prepared a present ahead of time, way to go Shiba-kun. He seems so aloof, but he can be that considerate. How mature, eh?"

Honoka's smile became increasingly happier.

Nonetheless, Eimi's next words cast a shadow on that smile.

"I understand he's also quite popular, eh. Just now, it looked like the president was giving him chocolate, maybe that might have been 'I love you' chocolate?"

"…President?"

"Ah. I got it wrong. Former president. Saegusa-senpai."

"Saegusa-senpai was?"

"However, it felt like senpai was detaining him against his will. Since Shiba-kun was making a somewhat troubled face, I don't think you should be worried."

Eimi had declared that there was nothing going on and she was probably voicing her real impression. But even though she had been told that, the inside of Honoka's heart was not calm.

"Doesn't it seem like Mayumi holds some special feelings for Tatsuya…" that suspicion had been in Honoka's mind for some time. If she had to compete against Mayumi, Honoka was not confident that she would win.

Her greatest rival right now, Miyuki, was restrained by the fact that they were 'truly brother and sister'. Ultimately, there was no way that they could be bound in that fashion, which gave Honoka some peace of mind.

However, Mayumi didn't have that restriction.

She was superior both in looks and actual magic power; the sole advantage that Honoka possessed was that 'the other girl was older than him'. However, Honoka did not think Tatsuya would be bothered by a one to two year age difference.

Waves radiated from within Honoka's heart.

The waves spread without showing signs of abating.

The waves did not confine themselves to Honoka's heart.

The thing housed inside the puppet had throbbed for an instant that morning with Honoka's incredible joy.

Now, through the link that formed at that moment, thought waves flowed causing it to throb again.

The barely born slumbering consciousness had truly awakened this time.

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When Tatsuya carried a big cloth bag past the school gate, the sun had already gone down.

Since it was the middle of February, the shortest of days had passed and sunset was falling later.

But they were still receiving a serving of extreme cold.

When the sun's warmth disappeared, the temperature dropped extremely rapidly.

Naturally, people moved into huddling distance — they couldn't help it.

Actually, there was almost no distance between the line of figures of students walking home in a hurry who had all remained to be evicted when the school gate was on the brink of closing. —However, there were some exceptions.

On both sides of Tatsuya, in short both Miyuki and Honoka stopped their movements just short of snuggling with him; for some time they had been alternately repeating the action.

On the surface at least, they were probably aware of each other's existence certainly, but…

"I wonder if perhaps it would be better if I went on ahead."

Maybe the eyes of the person walking with them were the ones that were most aware of their existence.

"No."

Lina's considerate remark was delivered in a monotone; Tatsuya replied with a curt denial.

Tatsuya and Miyuki and Honoka and Lina.

The ones who were currently together were these four.

Tatsuya's classmates had already been considerate enough to return home ahead of them.

However, Lina was a member of the Student Council, albeit a temporary one.

With both Miyuki and Honoka still working, there was no way Lina could leave early alone. Student government activities were not just like play when compared to her regular army duties; it was play, but that didn't mean that she could do the work indifferently. Since she had a sense of responsibility as well as an awareness that this was necessary for her infiltration duties, for the time being she was not a 'Sirius' and her daily activities did not include being a 'chief' or an 'executioner', and it would be a shame to let it go to waste with half measures.

Naturally, today of all days, that unfortunately resulted in her being stuck as the sole observer of Miyuki and the rest as they all went to the station, which put her in her current state of deep regret. —The ambience was so difficult for a third party to endure that Lina forgot that Tatsuya and Miyuki were the targets she was directed to observe and that if it was at all possible, she was to keep her eyes on them all day long.

"Really?"

Tatsuya said he didn't mind, and the other two silently refused to challenge that. She was on the brink of possibly going on ahead anyway when the station came in sight.

That being said, she still had to hurry down the straightaway; however,

"We're already this close to the station. So there's no need to think about going on ahead."

As has already been explained, modern cabinets do not have a timetable.

But that has nothing to do with up and down.

Tatsuya's house and Lina's apartment were in the same upward direction, and Honoka's was in the downward direction.

By chance on that day, no upward cars remained.

The waiting time posted on the platform was about three minutes.

The three saw Honoka off and waited inside the transparent wall to stave off the cold air for the next car to come around.

Three minutes more or less is a short time. It would not be unnatural even for people in an intimate relationship to not have a conversation.

In contrast, it was completely normal for people who knew each other but were estranged to not have a conversation.

The atmosphere between Lina and the siblings was divided between being hostile and friendly.

Calling a relationship where they had at one time tried to kill each other 'friendly' might sound odd if other people heard about it.

Nevertheless, neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki harbored any ill feelings toward her. Especially Tatsuya, who was aware that his feelings were closer to sympathy.

For now, Magicians could not escape from being treated like weapons.

Tatsuya especially could not forget that he was 'that type of thing' himself.

If he ever tried to reject that, the nation or society would probably try to eliminate him.

Since his magic held the potential of turning an entire nation into a wasteland.

—And that was true of Lina as well.

—She, like himself, could never run away from being a weapon.

—In a certain sense, Lina had a closer existence to his own than Miyuki's…

"…Something wrong?"

Perhaps due to his being engrossed in his musings, Tatsuya had been unaware that Lina wanted to say something until Miyuki pulled on his sleeve to get him to pay attention.

"…Not really, it's nothing."

Since Miyuki had deliberately let him know, this was not the case of Lina merely looking at him by chance for a few seconds. Lina's unnatural attitude also said that it was not an "it's nothing."

"Really."

However, Tatsuya did not make any insinuations in order to get her to confess what it was. He was not that much of a busybody, and if he got too close to Lina, Miyuki's mood would sink as well.

More importantly, the cabinet was about to arrive at the platform.

"Onii-sama."

And additionally.

"Is there something here?"

"No."

Turning his head, Tatsuya embraced his sister's shoulder.

Miyuki trembled in surprise, and leaned her whole body into Tatsuya without hesitation. No more questions came out of her mouth.

For these siblings, this was a simple way of silencing the other.

Tatsuya stowed the knowledge of the gazes upon them in his heart alone.

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"What's wrong?"

Her quick eyes spotting the tension running through her subordinate's body, Colonel Barans curtly questioned him.

The face of the operator who took his eyes off of the monitor to turn around trembled in confusion.

"Is…is he aware of our surveillance?"

"What kind of stupidity are you saying?"

Barans, the dyed in the wool realist, tossed away her subordinate's confusion as a mere figment of his imagination.

"It's a low orbital one but it's still a surveillance satellite. In the first place. There is no way you could spot the camera from the ground with the naked eye."

"But just now, I'm certain I saw Tatsuya Shiba's eyes look straight at me from the monitor."

In short, their eyes had met while he was watching the camera, but—

"No matter how superior a human's eyesight is, it is absolutely impossible for them to spot the actual form of a low orbital satellite, right. Much less pick out a camera on the satellite; it cannot be done even by the perception abilities of altered humans whose abilities have been massively transformed."

As Barans spoke in her irritated voice, the look on his face relaxed a little.

"Alright. Just in case. I'll take a second look at the images from three minutes ago."

"Yes, ma'am."

The real time images were switched to small window display and the recorded images began to be replayed on the main screen. The high resolution camera clearly displayed Major Sirius nervously allowing her gaze to make a round trip to the right, to the left and to the right.

That image was of deep interest to Barans (or rather she could not ignore it), but she concentrated her attention on her subordinate's problem, Tatsuya Shiba.

The gaze the boy directed toward Major Sirius flickered upward.

Certainly, it seemed like for an instant he had been peering at the camera.

Nonetheless, it was something that could be easily explained away if you thought about it, it was that minor a thing.

What probably actually happened was that he only took a look at the sky on a whim.

The proof was that after that instant he diverted his gaze from the camera.

"It's just your imagination, like I thought. It's better than letting your mind wander, but over-vigilance also leads to mistakes in judgment."

The colonel gave that instruction and turned her eyes away from the main display.

On the sub display, an image of Major Sirius riding inside the small railway car that was called a cabinet in Japan was presented. Of course, Barans was more bothered by the unstable behavior the young girl who bore the title of Sirius was showing.

◊ ◊ ◊

Lina returned to the rented apartment that was serving as her base of operations in Japan and made a deep sigh in front of the door to her own room.

She was aware that it was too late to do anything with the wrapped box of chocolates lying in her bag.

In the end, no matter how well she had prepared the courtesy chocolate, she had not found a good excuse to broach the subject and returned with it. Reflexively, she had dodged his question with an "it's nothing," but the truth was that afterwards, she had decided to pass it to him when they parted.

(…It wasn't necessary to dodge the question. It's just courtesy chocolate, after all.)

There was absolutely no deep meaning to the chocolate. In fact 'courtesy chocolate' was defined by the world as not having a deep meaning.

—Even so, for her it was a very important resolution. She repeatedly whispered to herself from deep within her heart a number of times that since she had taken the trouble to make it, somehow her stiff face had a smile on it.

Even though they had tried to kill each other once, they had also fought side by side, once.

(Besides, he's keeping quiet about who I am.)

Since it was only a courtesy, it was not improper. There was no reason to fear creating an improper impression.

She mustered her willpower and took the bundle out of her bag.

(It's such a waste…)

She hadn't passed it to him.

Suddenly, she had seen Tatsuya embrace Miyuki's shoulder and her hand wouldn't move.

(Why at that time did I…)

She received an extra level of shock from the fact that her hand wouldn't move from the shock of watching Tatsuya embrace Miyuki's shoulder.

(What on earth happened to me!)

That the chocolate had gone to waste was unfortunate.

(However, that was inconsequential.)

(More importantly, that was just as if I…)

This was a real problem for Lina.

(Isn't it like I received a shock due to my liking Tatsuya.)

(That's not a joke.)

Lina screamed that in her mind. She was deeply disturbed by her own reasoning.

(I refuse to accept this! I absolutely refuse to accept that I might feel that way about a guy who is so sis-con that he's illicitly in love with that nasty sister of his!)

(…I can accept that I'm aware of him.)

Though she was not aware of who she was talking to, Lina proclaimed that in her heart.

(I am aware of Tatsuya. And not in a normal way, but in an intense way.)

That thought seemed to snarl. Still, she herself didn't understand who it was snarling at, however.

(But, that's! That's because of the humiliation he gave me! Until I wiped out the stain of my defeat, I would not be able to get Tatsuya out of my mind!)

A normal girl might have quipped to herself that if that was so, perhaps she shouldn't have prepared chocolate, perhaps she should have prepared a white glove.

Nonetheless, at this time Lina did not have that much presence of mind.

When she opened the door in her unstable mood, she became aware of an abnormality.

Her state of mind quickly cooled.

Silvia had returned home, so Lina now lived alone.

Despite that, she felt the presence of a person.

Cold tension ran down her spine.

It was too negligent of her to not be aware of it until she opened the door, so she rebuked herself. While she mentally prepared herself that way, she cautiously slipped inside.

It was far too late for forethought, she thought, but she softly closed the door without making a noise.

She worried about what to do with her shoes for an instant. It was not really a significant consideration, but she did consider how much she was going to have to clean up later.

Once again, she rebuked herself to clear her mind of foolish, idle thoughts; she softly placed her bag on the floor and remained in a crouch in order to rush in.

"—It seems your declaration of perception abilities not being one of your fortés was a modest opinion."

And when the disgusted voice of the superior officer fell on her from above, she terminated her advance.

"If you had need of me, I would have come to you myself."

The way Lina finished up preparing the tea (and teacakes) could definitely not tactfully be called smooth as she timidly conversed with Colonel Virginia Barans, who was seated at the side of the simple dining room table.

Nonetheless, the colonel did not make an immediate reply to Lina's proposal.

"Possibly you might already know this, but the majority of my military service record is comprised of covert behind the scenes operations. And the major part of that career was in the management of personal relations."

Of course, Lina knew the personal history of a famous person like Colonel Barans. The colonel had graduated from a prestigious business school with superior grades and that record indicated a shrewdness no one would be ashamed to have, and the number of times her work had been on the front lines in her career was not few; she had given a meritorious war service that no one could complain about.

"Now that I have informed you of my experience, Major Sirius."

"Yes."

Lina made her spine straight as a pin and answered in a stiff voice. She had instinctively realized halfway through that these were not words to listen to with a smiling face.

"Regarding the current operation, I am concerned that you might possibly be a little too emotionally involved with your target."

Lina did not reply to Barans' probe. She had intended to prepare herself for it, but when it came that was completely useless.

"I would never…"

"Really. If I am overthinking it, then it doesn't have to go any further, but..."

While saying that, Barans turned her eyes to Lina's bag on the chair.

Lina's shoulders stiffened.

If she saw what was in that bag, no matter how much she lied, it wouldn't do any good. She was nearly convinced that her suspicions were true, and that would probably tip the scales. No matter how much she protested that it was a 'misunderstanding', it would probably be impossible to get anyone to believe her…

"I, too, intend to understand your special situation."

Nevertheless, Barans did not command her to "show her what was in the bag."

"You are the only one who has been assigned to the post of commander of the STARS corps while still in your teens."

The simple condemnation was accompanied by a slightly different gaze.

"The potential for magic to usher in a new age for the common people through the use of modern magic techniques allowing magicians to make new discoveries adding to the body of energy theory is high, but quite a few people say you are too young. If my opinion had been asked, I would have probably proclaimed that you were too young for the position of corps commander as well."

Barans' voice sounded different than the others who had chanted about the unusualness of Lina's position.

"You are now sixteen. I understand how it might be hard to control your emotions while being around your fellow sixteen year olds."

Understanding how her superior's earnest tone and mood were supposed to work on her, Lina inclined her ears with a meek look.

However, seeing the slightly sincere look on Lina's face for some reason made Barans sulk a bit.

"…From your point of view, I might be an obaa-san, but I am still in my twenties."

"Don't be absurd! I would never think anything like that!"

Lina frantically and vigorously sprang to give a defense against the unwarranted accusation.

Nonetheless, at the same time, Lina felt strangely and surprisingly relieved. The colonel, that impeccable female officer who was seemingly completely without chinks in her armor, was displaying an unthinkable 'cute' aspect which had the effect of purifying Lina of her tension.

"…Well, fine. Forget my outburst just now."

The look that said it was a slip of the tongue on Barans' face that Lina saw was probably the central part of the performance that was deliberately made to look completely genuine.

"…Certainly, I hold emotions toward Tatsuya Shiba that are undesirable in a soldier of the USNA."

Since this indeed made it possible for Lina to be more open.

"However, it is absolutely not feelings of love or anything similar to that. The feelings are the type of competitive feelings that a rival invokes."

"Rival, hm."

"Yes, I believe the colonel is aware of the written report that I was once defeated by Tatsuya Shiba."

"I see, this is the first time you have lost a magic battle since you assumed the title of 'Sirius'."

"Yes."

The truth was that she had experienced countless mock battles with Major Canopus since making it into the commanding officer level, but every one of them had multiple safety conditions and it was not necessary to correct the colonel's declaration.

"Understood. If that's so, then this is a simple conversation."

The colonel's tone subtly changed; the previous mood was mixed with notes of freezing cold.

That was the only thing that informed Lina that the moratorium was over.

"Major Sirius, at the present time, the tracking and disposal of the deserters is temporarily shelved and you are commanded to return to your initial assignment."

Lina had readjusted her posture before she noticed.

"For now, securing the 'conversion of mass to energy' cast sequence user takes precedence. If securing the user is impossible, then it is necessary to render the cast ineffectual."

To render the cast ineffectual is an euphemism for ensuring that there was no one who could use the sequence. Namely, to assassinate the user.

"For now, we will assume Tatsuya Shiba is the target. The first wave of our attack will be launched tomorrow evening using Stardust. You will equip yourself with Brionac and intervene when you judge the time is right."

"—Yes Ma'am."

With a blank expression, Lina stood up and directed a salute to Barans.

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Erika was part of the group of First High School students who had long commutes to school. It had been recommended that she get a room close to school when she got accepted by the school. However, she was obstinate about commuting from her own home.

It wasn't that she could not tolerate being away from her family.

It was the reverse.

When her father arranged the condo (he did not say he was "renting it for Erika," he said he was "buying it to give to Erika"), she became stubborn about "commuting from home."

Compared to the displeasure of doing as told by her father or eldest brother, the somewhat inconvenience was no big deal.

The road from the station to her home was pretty dark on the way back, and Erika walked instead of using a commuter. It was not something that was recommended for a pretty girl like her to do, but her family had absolutely no worries. Because perverts and the small time hoodlums called purse snatchers did not have people among them who possessed the skills to be able to harm Erika.

This was not a personal biased view, but the objective truth. Today, Erika once again survived traveling to the entrance to her home without anything happening.

Her room was not in the main house. Her 'home' was an annex beside the Dojo.

No one aside from her lived in the annex; the minute she entered her room, Erika flung her bag away and collapsed on her bed, still in her uniform. She wasn't usually this sloppy. She was just exhausted from the annual established customary event, her emotions running wild after all of the inquiring gazes she had received throughout the day.

She was aware of her own good looks (objectively she rated herself a little modestly), so she knew nothing could be done about the attention she received from boys around her age (and some girls) on a day like today, but…

(In that case, they should know I'm not the courtesy chocolate type.)

"From the start, they can only see my outer appearance" was the conclusion she made, which left her feeling even more exhausted.

She didn't hate the way she looked.

It was better to be beautiful than ugly.

But she thought the disadvantages equaled the advantages.

Erika believed it was better to have her level of prettiness than face the numerous hardships of being an overly beautiful girl like Miyuki.

But she hated being judged by appearance alone.

And of course she abhorred being fussed over for her looks.

An over-reliance on goodwill that comes from being good looking was only the foundation for the ill fortune of liking only the part of yourself that others like.

Erika was sure of that.

Her eyes spontaneously went to a spot above the dresser.

Which was adorned by a small photograph in a frame.

It was not a digital photo, but a photographic print of a woman with hair a little brighter chestnut than Erika's own and whose features greatly resembled Erika. The resemblance was such that after ten years you would think that Erika would look identical.

It was a picture of Erika's mother, who had passed on when Erika was fourteen years old.

The woman who gave birth to Erika was also the woman who created the reason she lived all alone in this annex.

Anna Rozen Katori.

That was the name of Erika's mother.

As the name suggested, she was half German.

And her family name was not Chiba.

For her father, the head of the Chiba family and one of the Hundred Families, Erika's mother had been his 'lover' if you used the current euphemism; if you used an blunt, old style word, she had been his 'concubine'.

Erika had not been allowed to use the family name of 'Chiba' until after her mother had died; moreover, it was not until just before she entered high school — actually, she didn't receive the name of 'Chiba Erika' until she took the high school entrance exam — that her relatives permitted it. (As a result, Tatsuya had not known of the existence of 'Chiba Erika')

Erika had been born before his legal wife had died from an illness. They did 'that kind of thing' while the wife was lying on her sickbed, as such, Erika thought that there were no excuses for what her parents did. It seemed cold, but on that note, she placed part of the blame on her mother.

Even so, she absolutely did not accept that her mother should be regarded as the only wrongdoer. After all, most of the responsibility belonged to her father.

There had been a time when she had lived her days not knowing the reason for the contemptuous eyes, her small body hiding even shorter breath.

There had also been a period when she just wildly swung her sword around in order for her mother and herself to be acknowledged. —That had been when she became the idol of Chiba Dojo. Among the young Dojo trainees in their teens and twenties, skilled students had gathered and formed 「Erika's personal entourage」 because they could see that Erika had lost her enthusiasm for swordplay after she lost her mother, and stuck their noses into a lot of her personal affairs.

Looking back at the past, she believed that now was the richest, most enjoyable time in her life up to this point.

Female friends who meekly accepted that 'they were no match for her' and male friends who could not see her core no matter how much they looked at her.

Classmates who warmed her heart,

Friends whom she could squabble with and tease,

A childhood friend whom she could also tease.

A group of friends who acknowledged her 'power' and the chance to brandish that power.

Now, waving a sword was fun.

The time she squandered in flourishing her sword was by no means wasted.

If she was with them, she felt like she could climb to the paramount.

Therefore — she didn't want to be bothered by trivial love games.

She idly gazed at the ceiling while she mused about these things; unexpectedly, the door chime rang. Not the signal to answer, but the signal of the door being opened. Since she hadn't turned the key, the person had probably entered freely.

There was no way she was going to peek in the room to see who it was — she didn't intend to act like she was nervous.

She checked the time.

It was too early to sit down for dinner.

Her two elder brothers (naturally, neither shared a mother with her) and her elder sister (of course, she didn't share a mother with her either) to be blunt hated sitting with her; on Erika's side, time slipped away. Since it was evident that whenever they met, not only her elder sister but she too felt uncomfortable, there was no need to persevere in obstinacy.

Just as she was about to rouse her body to see who it could be, there was a knock on her door.

By the way the footsteps sounded coming toward her, the even breathing, and the controlled presence, who it could be was narrowed down to her two brothers. Since her eldest brother was devoting all his time to a certain case and was supposed to be returning home late every night—

"Tsugu-aniue? Please come in."

As she said that, she migrated from above the bed to in front of the desk.

"Sorry for interrupting your rest, Erika."

Erika sat in front of the desk with the chair rotated toward the door, with her spine straight and both hands placed on her knees, but her next eldest brother, Naotsugu, took in the condition of the bed in a fleeting glance and voiced an apology.

Well, this level of observation power from an elder brother given the title of the 'Chiba Kirin' wasn't surprising.

Actually, Erika didn't even twitch an eyelid.

"No, I was just resting my body a little. Well then, you needed something?"

Seeing him with that female during summer vacation had unfortunately sent her into a frenzy, but other than times like that, being by the side of this brother was for Erika the place her heart felt most at ease.

She would only raise her voice to this brother when he was entangled with that female.

"Hmm… I'm puzzled about whether I should tell you or not, but… after all, I think I will tell you. Erika, I believe you have a male classmate named Shiba Tatsuya?"

"Yes, what about him?"

It didn't show in her face, but at this moment, Erika was pretty disturbed. Her next eldest brother suddenly asking about Tatsuya was completely unexpected.

"He is under surveillance by the National Defense Force."

"…Uh?"

"It's not surprising that you have difficulty believing it without any warning, but it's the truth."

Certainly, she had trouble believing this surprising information, but she probably found it hard to believe for a different reason than Naotsugu thought.

Erika knew that Tatsuya is what is known as a civilian member of the National Defense Force.

At that time, an officer had taken him away and told them that the fact Tatsuya is attached to the National Defense Force is a highly classified national secret.

So it was likely that the lower ranks of military personnel would not be aware of his status.

But still, Erika felt it was so ridiculous that she didn't even want to laugh, that a member of the National Defense Force would be used to conduct surveillance on Tatsuya, who was a member of the same organization, albeit an atypical one.

Naturally, dumbfounded as it made her, that had no connection to the duties given and so,

"I have also received an informal order."

It seemed that using a member of the same organization was not pure stupidity.

"Does the mission really need you, Tsugu-aniue, with your formal status as a student at the military college? What on earth could you…"

"Watching him and, if necessary, protect him."

"Watch and… protect?"

"Ah. Apparently Shiba-kun has got himself involved in some kind of trouble that the military has an interest in."

Erika thought that rather than being involved, he was the matter the military had been concerned with for some time now, but she thought she'd better not say anything for Tatsuya's sake and for Naotsugu's sake as well, so she was silent.

"Erika, I think it's better if you stay away from Tatsuya for a while."

"Do you mean even inside the school? He and I are in the same class."

She wasn't going to automatically listen and obey no matter how much she respected her next eldest brother, but — make no mistake, if her eldest brother had said that she'd be laughing her head off — for now she was going to try to investigate this extremely fishy matter.

"No, I believe that he won't be attacked at school."

From those words, she understood the true motive of the party that gave Naotsugu the order — rather than being a target, Tatsuya was acting as bait.

In short, the main attackers were a different lot than Lina; even if Lina was a part of it, the possibility of a different group was high… Erika decided.

"In that case Aniue, there's no need for concern. Since Shiba-kun and I are friends that go to and from the station together, we aren't close enough to make plans for after school or go to each others' homes."

"That's true. Really you should avoid commuting to school with him… since it wouldn't be good if you stir up uneasiness."

"Anyway, be careful, Erika."

"Thank you, Aniue."

—As she had been told to when she was with Tatsuya, she'd be careful, Erika added on in her heart.

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Immediately after they got home, Miyuki took the paper bag full of chocolates from her brother's hand and stowed it in the refrigerator.

Up until last year, even when he received no more than one or two, he had been concerned about his younger sister's response; however, this year, to Tatsuya's great relief, Miyuki's resentment had been cooler than he thought it would be.

"Onii-sama, I will soon start preparing dinner, so will you please stay in your room for the time being?"

Miyuki abruptly turned to Tatsuya, who had followed her into the kitchen in order to see how she was, and, with an unnaturally wide smile, thrust that barb.

If he translated it, she meant "don't come out and look until I call you." Remembering with a touch of unease how bizarrely things had played out last year, Tatsuya meekly shut himself up in his room.

And in about one hour,

"I've come…"

Without thinking, Tatsuya murmured that aloud.

The dining room was filled with a sweet fragrance, the genuine article completely different from Mayumi's fake concoction; there could be no mistake, this was the smell of chocolate.

With a smile — this time it was a natural smile — Miyuki invited him to take a seat.

Her appearance stunned Tatsuya into silence.

"How may I help you, sir?"

Her smile transforming into a wickedly mischievous one, Miyuki tilted her head slightly as she asked him.

Clearly, the face of someone who was aware of what she was doing.

"…I don't know where you could have gotten that costume."

"Costume? These are simple clothes used by waitresses."

Now that she mentioned it, the clothes certainly might be suitable for use by the hospitality industry.

However, not only did Time and Occasion have to be considered, but Place, and he did not think it suitable here.

If this was not a dining room in a private home, but rather a restaurant that served clientele with certain inclinations, then it could be said to fit the Time, Place and Occasion.

Miyuki's waitress uniform had puffy sleeves, a high laced jumper skirt, and an apron full of ruffles. In short, it was Julie Andrews style.

Even though he could understand how the concept suited the food, hadn't she gone a little too far…

"Umm, could it be that I don't look good in these clothes…?"

"No, it looks good on you. Very cute."

When his sister asked him that question in an unsure tone of voice, no matter what Tatsuya thought, he wasn't going to say anything that would hurt her and cause him to look for something to hit his head against.

"Thank you!"

In contrast to what was going on in the depths of Tatsuya's heart, Miyuki's spirit had revived and she brought out her dishes one by one. Leaving Tatsuya with no reason not to go to the dining room table.

On to the all important menu for today.

The main meat course was a beef filet in chocolate sauce.

It was accompanied by cookies full of nuts and a chocolate fondue.

The dessert was fruits with a brandy-infused white chocolate fondue.

Without exaggeration, it was overloaded with chocolate.

"Onii-sama, please enjoy this feast. I, Miyuki, have prepared this Valentine Chocolate especially for Onii-sama."

Certainly, this was not something that could be done if you didn't live together.

This presentation of cooked chocolate as something other than a sweet.

All things considered, it would certainly go into Tatsuya's mouth today.

Everything here was the result of Miyuki stretching her resourcefulness.

Around the time he finished the dessert, Miyuki's face was tinged with a lot of red. While he was eating the white chocolate fondue, he had been worried that Miyuki didn't cook out enough of the brandy's alcohol, and apparently it wasn't just a figment of his imagination.

Because Miyuki hadn't eaten as much as he did, she had absorbed a higher quantity of alcohol than him, but…

"Miyuki, are you okay?"

"Yes? What is it?"

As Miyuki answered with a puzzled look on her face, she got up to clear the table.

The pronunciation of her answer was slightly off.

Miyuki piled all the plates on top of each other in order to take them away in one go.

Tatsuya felt this was dangerous.

The normal Miyuki would have taken two to three trips to carry this many dishes.

She was probably not thinking about the difficulty and had unmistakably made the choice out of an unconscious desire to get it done quickly.

Tatsuya swiftly and silently went around the table.

"Eek!?"

As feared, he had to embrace his sister's body to keep her from falling when she tripped over her own feet.

There was no crash of dishes hitting the floor.

While one arm supported Miyuki, the hand on the other arm was catching the rest of the plates.

Smoothly, he twisted his body and returned the dishes to the table.

Afterwards, he once again supported his sister's body with both hands and straightened.

"Th…thank you, Onii-sama."

"Miyuki, rest on the sofa for awhile."

Miyuki did not protest that she was alright.

The only result of protesting would be causing unnecessary trouble for Tatsuya and that would be awful.

He piled the dishes in the sink and left the rest for the HAR to take care of for her. Even though she knew it wasn't a lot of work, she felt guilty for letting her brother handle the clean up alone and tried to rid herself of at least some guilt.

However, she could not avoid becoming depressed.

Despite the nice atmosphere she had created, at the very end she had clumsily stamped it out… was the lie she told to herself.

She could not help feeling that something beyond human understanding might be disgusted with her.

No, from the start it should be called disgust. It should be called an obstacle. It should be called a curse.

"…Why must I be Onii-sama's younger sister?"

With a large sigh, the words unintentionally sprang from her mouth.

A piece of her real wishes had gushed forth.

A shard that reflected her heart.

A phrase that had been repeating over and over in her heart since yesterday.

Panicked, Miyuki turned around.

The statement she made just now must never be heard by her elder brother.

A thought that must never be uttered.

She was not unhappy to be his younger sister.

These were Miyuki's true feelings, not a falsehood.

After all, the reason Miyuki could be with Tatsuya was because she was his sister.

Indeed, it was because she was his sister that her brother was constantly concerned about her.

However — without a doubt — there was also a self that desired a different relationship within Miyuki's heart.

For now, there weren't too many pieces.

Nevertheless, someday, that self might overwhelm the self that thought it was good to be his little sister.

Miyuki feared that day.

She feared her brother finding out about the part of her that wished for that.

When she had looked behind her, Tatsuya was still in front of the sink.

Even with the five sharp senses he possessed, the distance was too far for him to catch a soft whisper.

Miyuki was relieved.

In a corner of her heart, there was regret that he had not heard her.

She averted her eyes from that part of her.

Chapter 11

It was in darkness.

Despite its consciousness being awakened, it could not move the physical body.

The eyes wouldn't open.

The ears wouldn't hear.

The sense of smell and the sense of touch also wouldn't work.

If it were human, it would have probably gone mad in half a day. Nevertheless, it was not human. In the usual meaning of the words, it was not a living thing.

It could wait forever. After all, it did not possess the concept of what is called a life span. Since its consciousness had awakened, it had housed itself in something and itself was continuing to ponder something. In order to fumble for that, itself would have to learn about the vessel itself was housed in.

It soon realized what itself was. What had given it consciousness in this empty vessel it was inserted into, it did not ponder in the least. Because it was indeed an empty vessel, it was not distracted by thoughts that would become mere static.

It understood the purpose for which it was born. All that was left was to acquire the power of movement.

Patiently, it continued to wait when suddenly, it felt energy flowing into the vessel.

Quickly, it seized the body. The knowledge of how to do so was stored in the brain. Unlike last time, it took liberties, but happily, it did not remember that time. Within the brain, bustling electronic signals were changed into Psion signals; reading someone's mind was something it had experience with from last time. Even if it did not remember doing it, it understood how to do it and luckily, this vessel had accumulated a large quantity of Psions.

It read itself by immersing the interior in Psion signals it, itself, emitted. It learned the way to use this body. The eyes were able to see. The ears were able to hear. The fingers, arms, and legs moved. With this, it was now able to be used by that person. It did not want to intentionally show the joy from acquiring a body that moved.

—Nevertheless, the expression did not change. This body did not have a mechanism for changing expressions installed. Therefore, it had, with its own power, made the happy expression while it searched for that person with the brain it had acquired.

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Fifteenth February.

Instead of the unpredictable atmosphere of yesterday, a mysterious confusion floated over the campus of First High.

It had nothing to do with any of the students. Quite the contrary, the majority of the students had no direct contact with the incident.

Despite that, in a twinkling of an eye, a wave of curiosity about the mystery spread throughout the whole school.

Tatsuya stepped on to the scene of the incident during the noon break before lunch.

There was no way that this was a display of his curiosity. A first year whose face was familiar — an actual 'person involved in the incident' — had begged him until he reluctantly agreed to come.

"Ah, Shiba-kun."

When he recognized Tatsuya, Isori called out to him from somewhere in a relieved voice.

"Isori-senpai, thank you for calling me. Has Nakajou-senpai also been dragged into this?"

Needless to say, Tatsuya calling Azusa 'Nakajou-senpai' instead of 'President' wasn't because he still thought of Mayumi as president or any other secret meaning. As usual, Kanon was beside Isori. Among the crowd of people, Tatsuya focused on Hattori, the Group Management Leader, who was also there.

"A large number of students felt uneasy about the phenomenon…"

Azusa, herself, uneasily answered. Although she had been called in, this problem did not seem like one that was in her wheelhouse.

"However, to be truthful, I think the incident is beyond the skill of a high school student. Have we heard anything from the teachers?"

'To be truthful,' the fellow first year who had brought Tatsuya here, was in the vicinity and seemed to be thinning his lips in dissatisfaction because he felt that that did not apply to Tatsuya.

The 3H, [Humanoid Home Helper: a human shaped housekeeping aid robot] — a mechanism in human form — was smiling; it was said to have been hit with magic power.

If all the humanoid had done was smile, it probably wouldn't have accumulated this much concern. There was already a humanoid-type robot prototype equipped with an expression changing function. For a Type P94 that did not have an expression changing function installed to actually change expression was indeed an abnormal situation, but that would not bother people unfamiliar with technology all that much without a doubt. And in a Magic High School, there is a pronounced tendency to be unfamiliar with non-magic arts like purely mechanical arts.

However, if a puppet that wasn't supposed to be able to change expressions had been made to smile through the use of magic, then it was a paranormal incident that magic high school students could not ignore.

Even if they who used magic dealt with the 'Arcane,' they did not deal with the 'Paranormal.' In fact, they probably felt even more fear and unease from abnormal incidents because they were people who manipulated the supernatural.

"Until a little while ago, Tsuzura-sensei was investigating, but he stated that he could not draw a clear conclusion."

"He could not eliminate anything either?"

"That's right."

As he answered, Isori appeared to become a degree more bewildered.

"He was able to observe traces of a high Psion concentration from the body of the P94. Sensei said it seemed like they were being released from within the inner workings of the chest, outward."

As Isori replied, Tatsuya scowled, which might be only natural.

"The chest portion of a 3H is the containment unit for the electronic brain and the fuel cell? From which is it coming from?"

In the framework of the 3H, the communication unit and main sensor were in the head part, a single fuel cell was installed in the chest, taking up both the left and right parts with the electronic brain jammed into it, and information cables and energy cables passed within the skeletal frame.

If he said the origin of the emissions was the center of the chest, then it was probably the electronic brain, but…

"He said the vicinity of the electronic brain. Geez… the workmanship is too good."

The reply was predictable. Tatsuya didn't want to sigh with Isori.

It was normal, but there was no mechanism for emitting Psions in the electronic brain. It was necessary to have an induction stone transforming both electronic signals and Psion signals to get them to interact and there was nothing like an induction stone installed in the computer of a 3H — it wasn't needed. And truthfully, it was not something that was supposed to have been... installed.

"…Have the members of this club remodeled it?"

By this club, he meant the Robot Research Club. The place they were talking in was the garage assigned to them as a clubroom.

"If they had, they wouldn't be this worried."

The reply to Tatsuya's not really serious question was mixed with a dry laugh.

The slight jibe was not very useful in lightening the mood.

"Also, he seems to have been able to see traces of Pushions. But with them, he couldn't tell if the emissions originated from the inside or outside."

"Because compared to the Psion sensor, the performance of the Pushion-observing machinery is crude."

Isori's voice hung lightly in the air, but the supplemental information he gave strongly stimulated Tatsuya's mental processes.

Within his head, he was composing an astonishing hypothesis. He forcibly restrained his wild imagination and pressed the hypothesis causing those ideas to the back of his mind temporarily.

"Aren't you able to see anything strange in the CONTROL? Has it started moving on its own…"

"Oh, not up til now. Even now, it's obeying orders, waiting in suspension mode for the next command."

There were indications of people talking behind them. The way things were going he would probably miss lunch; well, Miyuki or Honoka might buy him lunch, Tatsuya worried.

"Then, what do you want me to do?"

Nevertheless, his conversation with Isori wasn't over yet. Why was he called in, and was it absolutely certain that he couldn't quietly order something to eat.

"I want you to check the P94's electronic brain. A CAD is an example of a mechanism that combines electronic arts and magic arts. And at our school, the most talented person who knows the most about CAD software is you. At least, that's what I think. Since the Nine Schools Competition."

After Isori said all that to him, possibly due to suddenly becoming aware of the stares from the gallery, he lowered his voice.

"I want you to make sure that there isn't something like the 'Golden Electron Silkworms' trick at the Nine Schools Competition."

"I see."

Even Tatsuya gradually got a grip on what Isori might be concerned about.

Certainly, if it were a delayed activation concealed type, then even if the expression changed, they still might not be able to detect someone using magic on the puppet. They didn't know why anyone would do that, but the possibility of criminal mischief was not zero.

"I understand. However, I cannot do a thorough check here, but could if I used a maintenance room."

"That will be fine. I'll get permission soon."

Azusa was the one who gave this answer. She was quite adept at using a phone style terminal, and she lifted up her face with a sigh of relief.

"I have permission to use a maintenance room. We can use it when fourth period is over."

Is that an implicit reminder not to cut class? Tatsuya commented in his head.

The room where the CAD modification machines were installed was called the fitting room. This room was normally used by students and staff to modify their CADs.

The maintenance room wasn't just for modifying CADs to fit the user, but also for tuning and arranging CADs; it also had devices for detailed configuration alterations and other mechanisms that made remodeling easier. However, they were expensive specialized machines and difficult to apply properly. For those reasons, Tatsuya brought the actual body of the P94 to the maintenance room that rarely had users.

Tatsuya's companions were Isori and Azusa, with the addition of Miyuki, Honoka, Erika, Leo, Mikihiko and Mizuki, his usual cohorts. Once his patient was stowed away, everyone else quickly fled, probably due to the overwhelming creepiness of that face.

Kanon, as Mizuki and the others learned, had gone on a procurement errand. The extra onlookers were shut out by Hattori. Hattori was not included among the extra onlookers, and that he acknowledged the rights of Erika and Leo to be seated with him gave a glimpse of his complicated personality. Of course, this was probably not due to any weakness of his. He looked somewhat relieved that they weren't gazing at Isori and Azusa like curious tourists.

"To start with, can't you tell me everything that happened."

While munching on the hot sandwich that Isori had kindly agreed that he could have when he suggested that they eat first, Tatsuya requested accurate information.

"I know no more than the rumors floating around campus."

The fellow first year that had dragged Tatsuya into the mess hadn't explained enough about the situation.

"The beginning of the incident was around seven o'clock this morning?"

In response to Tatsuya's demand, Isori nodded "of course" and, in a business like tone, began to explain.

——February 15th 7:00am

The 3H type P94 nicknamed 'Pixie,' which was stored in the robot research garage, was reactivated from suspended mode by a wireless device. The Humanoid Home Helper commonly called a 3H housekeeping aid robot also has a timer to restart it using its own power, but due to the burden on the fuel cells, it is recommended that an outside source of electricity be used.

When students are not in attendance, Pixie awakens and performs its self diagnostic program. The 3H user manual states that it is desirable for the diagnostic program to be run every morning before doing household chores. It is not a procedure followed very much in regular households, but the Robot Research Club follows the manual faithfully since they do not own the P94.

As stated before, there were no students in the garage. And there was no unusual activity observed from the cameras inside or outside the garage when the server used the remote application that had been installed in it to start the self diagnostic, no matter how much it's been examined.

The self diagnostic program concluded that there was nothing unusual in the startup process. When the program completed, the 3H was supposed to return to suspension mode.

As a matter of fact, the 3H which supposedly had nothing wrong with it did not perform its planned cease of function.

After the self diagnostic program stopped, the P94 began electronically communicating with the server. According to the access log, the data it received was the student register of this school.

Deciding that there was a high possibility that it was infected with remotely activated malware, a cease function command was sent. Since the cease function command applied to more than the electronic brain, the command superseded all other commands. Naturally, if an implanted program (as machines were not allowed to run amok) was used in the OS, resistance would be futile software wise.

Machines used by the military had a device inserted in them to shut out long distance remote commands, but machines for civilian use did not have that device installed. Of course, P94 was also unequipped with that kind of hardware. This allowed the shut down sequence to be processed safely; even though it took some time for it to completely shut down, there was no way the actual command could be ignored.

In spite of that, Pixie did not completely cease functioning.

Afterwards it continued requesting data from the server; on the server's side, it closed the wireless connection, and finally P94 stopped its abnormal movements.

Throughout this abnormal operating period, the observation cameras recorded Pixie smiling a seemingly happy smile—

"That expression is like it's excitedly waiting for something."

After Isori summed up everything, Azusa's face seemed a little paler, for her creepy expression probably incited fear. When a mechanical doll that was not supposed to change expressions made a face like that, even Tatsuya unmistakably got the creeps.

"I looked at the P94's logs and the mandatory command was certainly received. No, if it is to be trusted then without a doubt, the cease function command was executed on the P94's electronic brain."

As he listened to the words, Tatsuya appeared to ponder a little.

"…The P94 continued to operate when the electronics were supposed to be shut down because something other than electricity was sending command signals to control the machine. And I think that something was either a Psion wave, or some kind of magic power that was accompanied by a Psion wave."

"Just what I expected from you Shiba-kun, that's correct. Tsuzura-sensei stated the same thing, but I can't think of another explanation either."

"Understood… I will examine it."

As they talked, he felt that the machine being infected with a new type of virus seemed quite likely, but that explanation did not tie in the 'smile.' He hesitated to use his 'observation power' in front of Isori and Azusa, but apparently nothing was going to happen if he didn't monitor it.

"Pixie, suspension mode release."

Tatsuya spoke to the girl type robot seated on the self-propelled cart (to be correct, it was seated on the chair installed on the cart).

Results immediately appeared. To be brief, the normal response to the vocal input. The machine nicknamed Pixie quickly opened its eyes, stood up from the chair and bowed deeply.

"Do you have an order, sir."

The preset words for being activated smoothly flowed out of the slightly moving lips.

The unnecessary prepared phrase once again smoothly flowed in its fixed format; however, the tone felt like it was closer to human than before.

"Browse the operations and communications logs from after seven o'clock this morning. Rest on the stand, face up, and switch to inspection mode."

"Confirm administrator authority."

Tatsuya's command needed a supervisor authorization; Pixie's reply to this was also a preset format response.

Because she had not gotten down from the cart, her eyes were a little higher than Tatsuya's and the girl(?) was looking into Tatsuya's eyes. —Of course, that is how it would be described if it was a human behaving like this; actually, she was looking at his whole face. At this distance, scanning for an iris recognition system was still theoretical.

By the way, Tatsuya was not registered as a supervisor for Pixie. Consequently, a face pass (short for facial recognition security) was useless; that was not a way to give proof of authorization.

Actually, Tatsuya had an administrative authority card in his pocket.

Therefore, from the beginning, Pixie's eyes should not have been looking at his face, but at his pocket.

Despite that.

Pixie's gaze.

Stayed on Tatsuya's face like it was glued to it and did not move from it.

The time lost staring at him made fixated a better word to describe that gaze.

Just as not only Tatsuya and Azusa but everyone began to feel that 'something is weird,' Pixie moved.

A small whisper of 'Found' spun out from its mouth,

And in a deliberate manner, ascended from the cart,

And in the next instant flung itself at Tatsuya.

(Avoidance inadvisable!)

Within Tatsuya's own mind,

(Threat rating small.)

These compressed ideas flitted.

—Tatsuya caught Pixie's body, which was a head shorter than his own, from the front.

On the assumption that 3Hs would be used in civilian homes, they were constructed from light weight materials.

The impact was not all that large. Surely, it was probably on the level of being embraced by a normal adult woman.

An indistinct shriek sounded.

Both of Pixie's arms were firmly circling Tatsuya's neck.

In short, it could be honestly said, there was no doubt he was being embraced.

No one, Tatsuya himself included, could utter a word.

Being at a loss for words was a phrase probably made to be used for occasions like this.

Surprise of that extent ruled inside the room.

Robots could not make this passionate display of emotion—

"…Oh, Shiba-kun is even popular with robots."

The silence within the room was broken by a person who had not felt that moment of shock.

Kanon had just now entered the room and delivered that unamused one-liner.

This served as an impetus for them to, one by one, begin to revive from their emotional stupor.

Tatsuya felt a penetrating stare on his back.

Right behind him, a cold blizzard of rage was being sent at him.

Miyuki had promptly revived back to her normal state after being frozen in shock.

Although whether this should be called a normal state was not completely without question.

"…I do not know of any interest in playing with dolls within Onii-sama."

"Anyway, for now, calm down, Miyuki."

If all Miyuki did was send a rebuking look in Honoka's direction, well, anyway, Tatsuya did not think of any false accusations of infidelity(?) from his younger sister. —That he could make such assumptions with such things happening on a regular basis left no doubt that there was something wrong on the 'elder brother's' side.

"There is no way I'm embracing it. I'm the one being embraced."

"With Onii-sama's physical abilities, you would have no difficulty in evading it."

Certainly, if he had thought to evade it, he would have evaded it. The 3H's maximum mechanical strength was below what could accidentally damage household tools and utensils and it was also not strong enough to hurt their owners' family, so 3Hs were restrained to have less strength than the average adult woman.

"If I had evaded, I would have collided with you."

That is why he hadn't evaded Pixie, because Miyuki was right behind him. There was not all that much difference between their weights even if he leapt backward; it would be enough to stop him, but the possibility of him knocking Miyuki down was high.

"Oh, you could figure out all that in that instant."

"You can tell that much merely from looking."

Leo's voice showed surprise and Erika used a 'you just figured it out' tone for her one liner.

"…I am sorry. I was so rude…"

On the other hand, Miyuki, who hadn't understood (or rather had not been able to think clearly enough to reach that conclusion) after pressing both hands to her mouth, despondently and feebly poured out an apology. However, despite being visibly depressed, she was also somewhat happy.

"More importantly, we should do something about Pixie."

As a result of Azusa finally being able to move again, she made this suggestion in a diffident voice.

Tatsuya, who had been overlooking the fact that he was still being embraced, made a slightly evil looking smile.

"Pixie, release me."

At Tatsuya's command, the flexible resin coated mechanical arms of Pixie twitched. —This was a bit much for a simple movement created by a motor.

Pixie obediently removed its arms. —There was visible reluctance that was not a simple optical illusion.

The gaze with heat pouring out of both eyes looking up at Tatsuya was also not a figment of his imagination.

This should all be nothing more than an optical illusion, but — for some reason, Tatsuya could not ignore it.

"The change of mode command is revoked. Pixie, sit on the couch."

"As you wish."

This time it readily obeyed the order. The common sense interpretation was that it was because it was not a command that needed administrative privileges, however, due to the unnatural movements earlier that happened before their eyes, it appeared as if it was only meekly obeying because it was Tatsuya's order.

"Mizuki."

Next, Tatsuya called out Mizuki's name.

"Y-Yes?"

Mizuki had been deep in bystander mode; being suddenly named affected her speech.

Mizuki, herself, was not the only one who felt surprised; Isori and Kanon turned suspicious eyes on her.

"Mizuki, please peek inside Pixie for me. Mikihiko, I want you to guard Mizuki so she doesn't suffer any great damage from this."

"…You think something is occupying Pixie?"

Unconsciously, Mikihiko whispered the question.

"Something, hmm, you chose to put it in a roundabout way, Mikihiko."

Tatsuya's reply was also not straightforward, but they more or less expected what he had to say, so it was enough.

Instead of a CAD, which he was banned from possessing (on campus), Mikihiko produced charms and went on alert.

It seemed that Mizuki also discerned the path of Tatsuya's thoughts. She tensed, a slightly scared look was on her face, but even so she took off her glasses and steadily examined Pixie.

Mizuki's eyes widened.

Faster than she could open her mouth, a change came over Pixie.

There was an expression on the humanlike mask.

From what could be seen, it was establishing its existence — this could also be part of the phenomenon.

"It's there… the Parasite is there."

Someone gulped.

With the exception of Mizuki, everyone there was showing their surprise in individual ways, and each one of them stood ready for action in their own manner.

"But…"

Mizuki's whisper was not yet finished.

"This pattern…"

After Mizuki scowled and made an anxious "Hmmmmm," she quickly turned around.

"Eh, what?"

The focus of her gaze was Honoka.

After closely examining Honoka for a looong time, Mizuki's stare made numerous round trips between Honoka and Pixie.

"This pattern… resembles Honoka-san's."

And when Mizuki spun out her conclusion,

"Eeh!?"

Honoka raised her voice in horror.

"…What do you mean?"

Kanon was the one who voiced the blunt question, but she was not the only one thinking it.

"The Parasite is under the influence of Honoka-san's thought waves."

Confronted with natural surprise and natural doubt, Mizuki answered in a rare unambiguous tone of voice.

"Umm, you mean that it is under Mitsui-san's control?"

"No, I don't think there's that kind of link."

Mizuki shook her head at Isori's query.

"There's no link connecting Honoka-san and the parasite; I feel that the Parasite is taking and duplicating Honoka-san's thoughts. Perhaps, Honoka-san's 'thought' being baked into the Parasite is the proper way to put it."

"I am not doing that!"

"She is not saying that you are doing it deliberately, Honoka."

Tatsuya comforted the panicking Honoka.

"Is that right, Mizuki?"

"Ah, yes. It's not a conscious thing, I think it's closer to receiving the impression of past thoughts."

The outbreak of panic was averted.

However, the matter of doubt had not completely evaporated.

"Impressions of past thoughts… In short, things Mitsui-san thinks strongly about are being taken and copied by a Parasite casually floating nearby? And afterward, it possessed Pixie? Or was a Parasite inserted into Pixie and Mitsui-san's thoughts got cooked into…?"

Mikihiko's remarks were meant to collect his own thoughts; in essence, it was a monologue.

However, a moment after his remarks, Honoka suddenly hung her head in shame.

Concealing her face with both hands.

From what little that could be seen, her face was much redder than usual.

Apparently, she had some idea of how it happened.

Before anyone could cross-examine her,

[That's correct.]

The person, herself — no, in this case, 'itself' should be used — gave out the answer.

[I have been awakened by the strong, distinctive thoughts she has about him.]

Pixie's lips made a movement that a human could follow when the words poured out.

However, those 'words' reverberated not in their ears but in their minds.

"A working form of telepathy?"

"It seems that the Psions were a psychic residue, not a magic residue."

Tatsuya answered Azusa's murmur in that fashion and proceeded to stand in front of Pixie.

"Is voice communication possible?"

[Understanding voice is possible. However, manipulating this body's vocal organs is difficult; please use this intentional transmission called telepathy.]

"Because they're not vocal organs; it is a mechanism. That being said, it seems that you comprehend our words quite well; how did you learn to do this?"

[The knowledge was inherited from the previous host.]

"So you are the Parasite from that time."

[Parasite — something that lives in another being. Yes, I am something like that.]

"Your kind can change your hosts this way. How many people have you sacrificed until now."

[Sacrifice — there are objections to that concept. The question of how many is one I can't answer. I cannot remember that.]

No one tried to interrupt the conversation between Tatsuya and Pixie.

Everyone was anxiously focused on them.

"You say that you don't remember most things?"

[Wrong. When we move to a new host, what can be inherited is only knowledge that separates with the parasite. Memories connected to the personality are lost when we transfer.]

"I see, so you don't know what kind of person the previous host was, and you say you can't remember if it was one person, two people or even a multitude."

[That is right. Your understanding is correct.]

"Aside from the answers to my questions, can you relate impressions that you had. Does even your kind have emotions?"

[Even we desire to survive.]

"In short, you want to say that the existence of your likes and dislikes is derived from what you have decided is beneficial or harmful to your survival."

Tatsuya temporarily stopped speaking,

"However, I do not intend to discuss the origins of emotions right now."

He quickly returned to asking questions.

"What should I call you?"

[We do not have names, so please call me this individual's nickname, Pixie.]

"Did you draw that knowledge from the electronic brain?"

[That became possible when I acquired this body. But regarding the individual's nickname, it is because until now, that is what you have been calling me.]

"Well then, Pixie. Are you an existence hostile to us?"

[I am your underling.]

"Mine? Why?"

[I want to become yours.]

The parasite housed within Pixie directed a noticeably passionate gaze in Tatsuya's direction.

[I was awakened from my sleeping state by the thoughts of that girl — her individual name is 'Mitsui Honoka.']

After a cut off shriek, a groan that leaked out of a blocked mouth reached Tatsuya's ears.

When he quickly looked behind him, he saw Miyuki and Erika, restraining Honoka's mouth together.

[We are drawn to strong thoughts; those thoughts mold the nucleus of 'self.']

"Strong thoughts? Are all types of thoughts alright?"

[No. Only highly pure thoughts can give birth to a self of our kind.]

"By highly pure, do you mean deeply buried thoughts of simple desires?"

[That's correct. I think the closest concept in your human words is 'prayer.']

'What kind of 'prayer' awakened you?' was not asked by Tatsuya. He already had that answer and because he understood that, asking more questions about that was nothing but suicidal. Nonetheless, although Tatsuya didn't ask, Pixie started to passionately state her own origin.

[I want to devote myself to you.]

Behind Tatsuya's back, the moan did not intensify.

[I want to be useful to you.]

There were indications of a struggle behind him.

[I want to serve you.]

It might be a powerful struggle, the people restraining her seemed to have started erratically panting.

[I want to become yours. I want to dedicate all of me to you. That is the prayer that awakened me.]

If her mouth wasn't being blocked, Honoka would probably be screaming.

[As I have already stated, because the previous host's 'memories' are erased, I do not know what kind of thought drew 'me' into this world. And now, the core of my structure is the desire 'to belong to you.' I am already an underling to you.]

A thump, the sound of three people hitting the floor could be heard; Honoka had probably reached her limit, was no longer capable of standing, and had taken down Miyuki and Erika as she fell.

However, Tatsuya showed no response to Honoka's shyness.

"An extremely intriguing story."

Tatsuya's consciousness was occupied not by 'emotion' but by 'knowledge.'

"If the fact that your kind has an ego is unexpected, then the fact that your kind is persistently passive is also unexpected. Essentially, you are claiming that your kind did not wish to come to this world."

[Originally, we just existed; 'desire' is manifested according to the host.]

"That struck home. Well, there will be another opportunity to ascertain responsibility… Pixie, you said it was alright for you to be commanded by me."

[That is my 'desire.']

"So then, obey my command. From now on, using psychic power without my permission is forbidden. This changing of the expression is a type of psychokinesis, right? That is also forbidden."

"As you have commanded."

As her own proof of her words, Pixie replied in an awkward voice.

The smile disappeared from that face. The mechanism's structure changed back to the former synthetic face.

Nonetheless, it seemed like a strange smile could be seen in that synthetic face.

Chapter 12

"I did not think an apparition could possess a robot."

"Probably because it's a humanoid type, or something like that. An artifact spirit, unbelievable."

Tatsuya replied to Miyuki, who had a look on her face that said she still didn't really believe it, in a manner that said he didn't want to believe it.

The siblings were not talking in their living room, but in their personal car. This car was not a commuter that they shared with the public, but Tatsuya's personal property. The name on the form said it belonged to his father, but the money for the purchase had come from his earnings as Taurus Silver.

As for why they were not using a commuter that was as cheap to use as a bus was half a century earlier, Tatsuya had a personal car in order to deliver Miyuki to places in a secure and prestigious manner.

Not many people were aware of it, but Miyuki was the daughter of a good family, in other words an 'Ojou-sama.' And a very high class one.

As part of her training for her position, she underwent studies in addition to her schoolwork.

Thanks to the special circumstances of the Yotsuba, she never went anywhere that might cause her to encounter Mayumi, but she still received private tutoring in order to hold her own at the highest levels of society, so she had to go to them in style.

Of course, there was a Driving Control Artificial Intelligence, and the luxury car was built to be bulletproof, heat resistant and had an anti-impact system installed; Miyuki continued to speak inside it while wearing a gloomy expression that did not suit the gorgeous clothing she was all dressed up in.

"And so Onii-sama… what do you intend to do?"

"By what, do you mean how I'm going to deal with Pixie?"

On the other hand, the dark jacket he wore couldn't be called formal, exactly; it could be said that Tatsuya was dressed more like a high school student while making a face that failed to become a wry smile, as it was more of a halfway expression.

"Because, there is no way I can take it home with us. Perhaps I'll just have to come up with a proper excuse that I can give to the school."

"…You can't take it home? Pixie wanted you to do that…"

Miyuki asked in a voice that had some fear mixed in it.

"There is no way it can enter the house."

This time Tatsuya's face was smiling as he replied.

"We know very little about the biology or nature of Parasites. There's no guarantee that the Parasite was not lying."

According to folklore, youkai did not lie; only humans that lied had been Ama no Jyaku's weakness as a youkai.

Despite the fact that youkai who could not lie and youkai who did lie only existed in stories, at the time, no one there had doubted the words of the Parasite that claimed to possess Pixie, but it was something unbelievable to Tatsuya.

"Its claim that it was created from Honoka's thoughts is not without proof. Since Mizuki saw the 'traces' that had been left behind. But other than that, we only have its word for it. Since we don't have any way to know what kind of abilities it has, there is no way I'm going to keep it close to us. What if Pixie has some way to communicate with other parasites, calling them closer to it while we are sleeping? It would be the absolute worst situation. At least until I can confirm that it has no means to contact the other organisms, I will not hear of such foolishness."

When she heard him state his decision in a bland tone, the shadow disappeared from Miyuki's face in the twinkling of an eye. "But if that's so, how can you trust the answers you get from cross-examining it; is there no way you can know?"

"That is the same condition that applies to interrogating human prisoners of war. The authenticity of the extracted information is something that can be decided only from our side."

Some stiffness still remaining in her face, Miyuki was erasing the traces of happiness on her face through her willpower.

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It was not all that big and not all that removed from common sensibilities; at the entrance to the elegant, western style house, Tatsuya handed off his role of guard.

Even though it was called a hand-off, it was nothing more than verifying the person's face.

The classroom where Miyuki took piano and etiquette lessons (it might be better to call it a school) was prohibited to men. Even bodyguards, the accessory of the rich and powerful, were not allowed to enter.

"As usual, when the time comes, I will come to get you."

"Yes, I will wait for you to come."

Therefore inevitably, they would have this conversation at the time of the exchange.

By the way, the time he would come to pick her up was in two hours. Because he would have to use half that time if he returned home, it was normal for him to pass the time in a neighborhood food shop.

Tatsuya entered the name of the family oriented restaurant he had chosen into the GPS system. If he went into an alcohol-oriented shop dressed in more adult clothes, he would not be sent away, but he did not feel like doing that today.

He would have his evening meal at home, so he only ordered a drink. Normally, a customer who stayed for two hours and only bought a drink would be a problem for the shop, but whenever he was waiting for Miyuki, he ordered something expensive no matter what kind of shop it was. So it was alright not to worry about unintentionally causing harm.

Even if he got a dirty look, all he did was pretend he did not see it.

Tatsuya took up position in a vacant seat and did not open up a publication website, but just gazed out the window.

He looked like he was just daydreaming.

Tatsuya, himself, was not concentrating on anything.

Nonetheless, what he was doing was the complete opposite of the usual meaning of 'daydreaming.'

He was not focusing his mind, but diffusing it.

Wider and wider, with Miyuki and himself as the two focal points, he laid his perceptions over every nook and cranny in the area.

This was not looking down from a bird's eye view, but looking at things from the point of view of the information dimension.

It was not an elliptical sphere around the double focal points, as it had nothing to do with physical distance; Tatsuya fixedly concentrated his 'eye,' intensifying his contact with the law of cause and effect within Link space.

So that he wouldn't miss even one thing that could harm Miyuki.

Because he had this 'eye', he overcame the barrier of his gender and could be employed as his sister's only guard.

To be correct, he did not normally use this 'observation field.' Normally, he operated this unconsciously; right now he was consciously using it and even intensifying it.

Suddenly invoking his vision of the relationship of cause and effect left him open to 'accidents;' namely leaving his body behind in the physical dimension by incessantly using it; when he was in link space, any wound he suffered wouldn't heal. Becoming engrossed in 'observation' was a situation that could indeed make him switch his mind to that side.

Even if he called it Link space, the dimension did not really have that kind of meaning.

The ways you were able to see something formed part of a framework of recognition.

Also, even if he called it Links, it did not mean he saw red strings or black chains connecting people; he could read no more than the information related to cause and effect. Perhaps someone else would be able to see red strings or black chains if they used those symbols; the images Tatsuya used pointed out the existence of what he realized were focal points jutting out behind the scene indicating the existence of cause and effect and events, etc.

In theory, the way he did things could be used to predict events; however, Tatsuya still could only read information on the 'present' and twenty four hours of the 'past.' As a result, it was extraordinarily effective at searching for enemies. It was probably equal to having an innate skill at remote viewing, though it was better than that because it had the potential to distinguish enemies with precision and range.

Within that observation field, the information about the looming adversaries was displayed.

They were not after his sister; he, himself, was the one they were coming after.

(I am a failure as a guard.)

Since he, himself, had become a target, he was exposing the person under his protection to danger. Calling himself a failure as a guard was not an insult he usually inflicted on himself.

However, he was not able to lose himself to the whispers of despair or remorse that were never quite voiced.

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Lt. Colonel Virginia Barans made a slight nod when she heard the report that the troop emplacement was complete.

Prior to the current operation, they had analyzed the target's daily habits and the fact that there were so few opportunities to attack had shocked her.

Moreover, the target almost never played at night like a child(?).

The target trained every morning before his morning commute at the Ninja Dojo where they could not interfere with the target at a moment's notice.

(There were many americans who would have made this type of mistake as she did just now.)

He had gone somewhere on his bike the past two Sundays but he had quickly lost his tail and even using the observation satellite, they still had absolutely no idea where he went.

The only thing they understood from two weeks of observation was that he was no ordinary high school student. They had just about concluded that he was an agent of a special ops group. They had doubts because the target did not have any special connections (to be correct, they assumed he didn't) but their investigation was not quite futile.

Lt. Sirius had already established the degree of difficulty of getting to him when he was with his younger sister. The target did not spend much time alone, much less, in places where the potential to escape was slight — this evening was one of those few chances.

"Lt. Sirius, can you hear me?"

When Barans spoke to the dedicated radio device, she immediately received a reply from Lina. The girl was standing by in a nearby park as planned.

This was the operation.

'Stardust' members disguised as robbers would break into the restaurant, and make a non-lethal attack. And if it was possible to capture the target, abduct him. If they received a counterattack then, exchange battle while fleeing and lead the target to the park where Lt. Sirius was waiting.

It was a vague plan, but under conditions with a large number of uncertain elements, this was as detailed a plan as it could be; she didn't just practice combat operations in order to make a good show for her superiors, Barans had learned to practice in conditions as close to actual combat as she could.

After all, in chess, you were able to see all of your opponent's moves, so only elaborate tactics were useful in it.

(There was concern that Stardust might be completely destroyed in the first phase however……)

That possibility is slight, Barans tamped down on her own uneasiness.

She could however decide to abandon the operation in case of failure, but Stardust were also modified magicians whom the USNA had poured their magic technology into. That these five men could be destroyed by one boy in the middle of his teen years was unthinkable .

Even if the target was as she believed him to be a user of an unknown strategic class magic, there were numerous cases where magic that was aimed at causing large scale destruction was useless in personal combat. If the target possessed destructive power of the strategic class magic, then it was even more likely that he could not use it unless he was prepared to kill himself as well.

Unless he had a special tool like Brionac.

(Even if they were wiped out, all records of Stardust had been erased so it was impossible to determine their identities.)

Therefore, even if the operation failed, it wasn't necessary to worry about consequences, thought the Lt. Colonel putting an end to her speculations.

She seemed to be purposely not thinking about Murphy's Law.

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After she had finished her business with Barans, Lina did the final check on the tactical magic weapon, 'Brionac', in the station wagon that was parked in the park's parking lot.

It was constructed for her use, and no one but her could use it; it was a super weapon such that even she who was the commander of the USNA magician troops was not allowed to choose when and where she could use it. While it was a portable weapon, its maximum power was equivalent to the main armament of a battleship; although it had such destructive power, its range and output could be freely controlled. It had an absurd outward appearance: it was a thick pole about four feet in length.

About two thirds of it was about the same width as the handle of a tennis racket, and the remaining one third was a cylinder with a bigger circumference; at the border between the two, a box shaped stick about the right width and thickness for her hand was placed cross-like.

Even though it was called an inspection, the weapon worked purely by magic power.

The armament was combined with a CAD, it was a magic weapon.

The Brionac did not use electrical powered movement or springs. So naturally, she did not perform a mechanical inspection. So even if it was called an inspection, she was only checking the responses in stand by mode prior to invoking magic.

She knew that by this tool's very nature, it could not have a complicated structure. However, when she carried the Brionac which looked kind of like a cane, a spear or a club, she had the strange feeling that she had become a heroine in a fantasy novel (or a game).

Speaking of strange feelings.

(There was no way she felt any doubts about the colonel's abilities but…..would it go well?)

Essentially, Lina doubted that the crude operation would be effective against Tatsuya.

Lina also understood that a too detailed operation wasn't combat effective.

Nevertheless, the main phase of the operation was to be completed by the five men who were operatives at the 'Stardust' level, and she felt that she wasn't going to have to endure a difficult wait. She was concerned that the possibility of them being wiped out quickly was probably quite high. Tatsuya is satellite class, no, he had fought above the level of four Stars member in an actual battle.

Tatsuya was a dangerous opponent; however, at first, Lina had thought Miyuki the tougher adversary.

Nonetheless, such thoughts had now completely disappeared.

Any inclination to treat Tatsuya lightly due to his lower rank were gone now.

She was able to realize recently that the embarrassing defeat she, herself, had suffered was not in any way due to her being careless.

If she had called his bluff, she might have been able to see his weirdly limitless true strength. And then, she really had no idea what would have actually happened to her.

—What could the magic that turned 'Dancing Blades' to dust be?

—What on earth was the technique that cancelled the effects of 'Muspelheim'?

At the time, she thought it was simply the bonds of the intermolecular forces being destroyed.

She thought the activation sequence had been neutralized.

But the instant she started to think about what could possibly do that, Lina's mind froze.

She became aware that such a thing couldn't be done.

At least, no one in the Stars could, herself included.

Destroying the bonds of intermolecular forces was one thing.

On the other hand, cancelling the effects of Muspelheim.

Neutralizing magic required interference power exceeding that of the magic being neutralized.

Even if she conceded that he had greater interference power than herself who was a Sirius, at that time, he had also affected Miyuki's magic.

In that frozen area, her own Muspelheim and Miyuki's Niflheim had battled for supremacy.

As the two opposing activation sequences had clashed, only the effects had cancelled each other, the magic had not been neutralized. In order for magic to be neutralized, a calculation sequence must overwrite the magic sequence.

In short, at that time, if the resources that Tatsuya commanded had neutralized the magic then he had invoked over twice Lina's interference power.

The moment she thought of that, Lina became unable to quell the shaking in her body.

If that was really possible, then Tatsuya must secretly posses a technique that used power of that magnitude.

If there was a method other than neutralization to cancel the effects of magic, then it would also destroy more than the magic sequence.

Lina also knew that attacking with a high pressure stream of psions was also a means of destroying a magic sequence but at that time, there was no sign of that.

It had not been destroyed by an outside attack, it had been destroyed by interfering with the inner information structure — the Stars vice commander, Benjamin Canopus might have been able to figure out that Tatsuya had used 'Gram Dispersion' to do that. However, Lina was unaware of the magic known as Gram Dispersion.

She had been young (immature might be more appropriate) when she joined the Stars troop; unlike a normal girl, she had an abundance of combat experience but aside from that she had not been able to take enough time to acquire enough knowledge. Of course, compared to a normal (magic) high school student, she had a large variety of knowledge, but the quantity of knowledge you have is limited by the time spent acquiring it. No matter how well she was versed in the knowledge she had, information she hadn't learned could not exist in her mind.

The unease gripping Lina was brought about by the lack of time studying caused by the deficiency of her ability to expand her experience. To put it simply, the girl was too young to be the commander of the Stars.

It might be better to say that it was the embodiment of the weaknesses of the abhorrent practice of the doctrine of complete relying on strength to determine leadership.

Until now, that weakness hadn't really affected her, but now she had a mission outside her home country with insufficient support staff against an opponent like Tatsuya who had not only had opportunities to acquire combat experience but had formidable knowledge and technical skills, and she was paying the price for her deficiencies.

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Tatsuya was not a battle junkie. At least he thought so, and so far any fights he had taken part in hadn't actually been started by him. Essentially, they were all for the sake of defending Miyuki's safety and prestige.

That being said, he was not a practitioner of nonresistance. He possessed the youthful(?) idea that it was necessary to fight and win to protect peace.

(Hmm, five men…..)

They were parked across the street in an SUV. Tatsuya deliberately hesitated to confirm the number of men in position to spring from the car even now.

In this situation, if you wanted to flee, you should be able to do so. It should be alright to retrieve the car by remote control later.

The decision only took a second.

He finished settling his bill on the table terminal and stood up.

They probably saw that, as they hurriedly opened the SUV's door.

Tatsuya went to the entrance at a quick pace.

The shop's entrance was directly across from the SUV.

The five men who were wearing something like ski masks stood in the road. They had gotten there about the same time Tatsuya left the shop.

The eyes in the masks were blue, red, black, brown, and gray.

They were color contacts worn to completely disguise the fact that foreigners were committing a crime, but it's possible that that wasn't the reason. On the contrary, it didn't really feel like they were trying all that hard to conceal their appearance. Perhaps, they had confidence that they had concealed everything about their identities aside from their faces.

The attackers seemed a little perplexed at the fact that Tatsuya was standing right in front of them.

Nevertheless the exchanging of stares did not continue for long.

Tatsuya moved.

He neither advanced or retreated, he walked out on the road past the line of vision of the men.

A feeling of astonishment came from them,

Tatsuya was distancing himself from them without changing his pace.

Just as the distance of five meters was going to become ten meters, the attackers came to their senses.

The small clink of a gun being leveled at him reached Tatsuya's ears.

This was not a gun shaped CAD, this was a weaponized device that combined a CAD with a submachine gun.

This armament alone was enough to serve as a confession from them that they were USNA magicians.

Western European, Eastern European, and New Soren did not use complicated mechanical weapons.

The only ones aside from the American army who might use such an elaborate weapon would probably be Japan's Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion.

From the unfolding of the activation sequence, he understood that the rubber bullets would be electrified upon firing and release their charge upon impact. Probably, it was some type of taser gun. Apparently, they had received some kind of order to take Tatsuya alive.

Tatsuya had already thrust his right hand into his pocket and was holding the grip of his CAD. And he had used his fingers to find the trigger and put his finger on the switch.

With his back facing the masked men, Tatsuya pulled the trigger on the CAD.

He quickly turned around and kicked the surface of the road.

The parts of the submachine gun made a dull sound as they scattered all over the pavement which Tatsuya could hear as he was running away.

All these actions were stuffed into the interval when his opponents were frozen in shock.

Just as Tatsuya entered the period where they were all without weapons, his enemies were finally released from their stupor.

The shock was probably too much for them, Tatsuya thought, but all this might be unavoidable.

Under normal circumstances, in order to interfere with an object under the influence of someone else's magic, it was necessary to have interference power that obviously exceeds the other person's magic power.

In the cases where the other magician was physically touching the object, the level of difficulty went way up. So it could be said that it was close to impossible for the CAD and Armament devices to be instantly destroyed by magic for a number of reasons.

However, it would be a mistake to believe that this is why the men were surprised.

The magic used by them was the magic that would make the rubber bullet electrified upon firing and release their charge on impact. The target of their magic hadn't been the guns but the bullets. The bodies of the guns were connected to the CADs but the breech-blocks, the percussion devices and the rest were mechanisms completely isolated from the CADs.

Originally, for the sake of maintenance, the weapons were constructed to be easily taken apart into pieces; something Tatsuya's magic could easily manipulate. The reason they had been shocked until now might possibly be because until now they had believed that the Japanese were probably aficionados of swords, the way Americans were probably aficionados of guns.

Of course, Tatsuya was not just casually thinking about such a thing.

Those thoughts he had made out of reflex when he saw his adversaries' shocked faces were only running in the back of his mind. The focal point of his mind was on taking out whatever means they were going to use to attack him in this interval.

To Tatsuya there was no reason not to capitalize on this.

However, this was a public thoroughfare.

This was not a busy street, this was not late at night, there were passersby, and traffic cameras here and there. Killing them would cause various problems.

Therefore in the presence of so many reliable witnesses, he did not want to display 'disintegration' magic. So it was best if he did not disintegrate the parts.

All that thinking was packed into that interval.

Tatsuya stuck out the back of the palm of his hand.

His target was the stomach.

Aiming at the solar plexus didn't take much work.

He used flash cast just as the bottom of his hand struck.

The invoked magic was an oscillation type.

From the touch of his palm, his opponent's body was filled with oscillating waves — that was what was supposed to have happened.

However, his magic splattered. Tatsuya realized that not from the feelings from his hand but from the 'eye' he observed with.

He immediately jumped to the side.

He felt a wind blowing up from below.

His afterimage was pierced by a glossy black knuckleduster worn on his adversary's fist.

He escaped to the side and switched to the back and sent a vibration wave through the man one more time.

The man's body fell to the ground from the single attack that came from his blind spot.

Even so, the man's ability to resist magic was astonishing.

In spite of physical touch increasing the amount of information about how to weaken the armor that was part of the magic he was launching against the man, the man's reflexively invoked interference power had wiped it out. No matter how power is put out, the magic was emitting from an inferior virtual magic area; so ordinarily, this was impossible.

(Modified body — no, probably a reinforced human.)

While he was jumping and dodging the attack from his enemy who had stood up and resumed his stance, he was accessing information on his opponent's body and investigating this living organism.

From the report on the warped structure, this was not simply DNA modification; unmistakably the report showed results of multiple preposterous reinforcements.

(With their bodies like this, how are these guys even moving?)

To Tatsuya who had 'observed' hundreds of people on the brink of death, the fact that these guys could collapse at any time was obvious.

It would be more appropriate for them to be in hospital bed receiving intravenous drips than to be waving around knives and guns.

Despite that, they had this vitality.

They were like shooting stars just before they burned out.

Without a doubt, they were stardust trapped by the earth; their bodies whittled down by the blaze of the radiance they could not endure emitting.

If it was at this level, then they would never accept themselves failing; there was no way to know what kind of recklessness this type of irregular opponent would commit.

It was somewhat risky, but he had to finish them off quickly.

With that, Tatsuya's objectives changed. Within his mind, he quickly redrew his plan for his upcoming attack.

—After jumping even further back to gain distance, his hand reached toward the CAD in his pocket.

—As he took it out, he performed a fourfold invocation of part separation.

—This would certainly be able to halt his opponents.

As Tatsuya was solidifying the image, by coincidence just as he was doing that.

A man intruded on the scene.

Chiba Naotsugu was rushing.

Unbelievable, a street fight suddenly starting was unanticipated. The excellent data on the classroom educational records had left him with the preconceived notion that Tatsuya had a timid introverted personality.

He was about eight hundred meters away from the boy who was the focus of his observation and protection assignment on the third floor terrace of a mid-sized building. The dossier said his target was extremely sensitive to his surroundings, so he had kept his distance and it led to this screw-up.

Running down the stairs was also a waste of time.

Maintaining his specialized skill, he jumped off.

Continuing in that fashion, Naotsugu kicked the surface of the road.

Naotsugu's mastery of the acceleration magic (formerly a sage's skill) made it possible for his running speed to reach 120 kph for a short distance.

At this distance running was faster and swifter than using a car.

It took him about thirty seconds to arrive.

Along the way, he sensed two invocations of oscillation type magic.

He was able to see from behind the fight, an attacker receive a bottom of the palm strike and tumble down onto the road.

Within his mind, Naotsugu murmured, 'did that boy use magic arts?'.

The dossier did not mention this information.

Since this was not information worth concealing, the dossier makers had probably not gotten a hold of this detail.

There seemed to be various other hidden gems of information.

Naotsugu's interest in the observation target — in the current situation, he was switching it to subject of protection — 'Shiba Tatsuya' deepened inside him.

Good grief, just what is his fighting ability…

Nevertheless, there would be other chances to check that out. Naotsugu was a person who drew a line between private and business matters. (At least, he thought himself as such)

He pressed the switch on the armament device he was holding in his hand.

The short baton morphed into a kodachi.

Naotsugu had modified the newly developed product that the Chiba clan had just begun to supply to law enforcement for his personal use.

He preferred convenient, easily replaced, general use weapons to unique high quality weapons like 'Ikazuchimaru' and 'Orochimaru'.

Weapons were fundamentally tools to be used and replaced. Besides, even famous blades became dull with use.

It was an ironic thought for someone who styled himself as 'one of the world's greatest magicians in combat within a three meter limit'.

The boy which he had to protect made a great leap backward.

The information contained in the dossier concerning the troops facing the boy displayed itself in Naotsugu's brain.

His opponents were Stardust — modified magicians attached to the USNA, no, they were weapons made from the bodies of magicians. A suicide squad constructed of magicians who were certain to have no more than a few years left to live who had been strengthened and altered. In Stardust, there existed groups that had various abilities. Naotsugu was able to learn that the unit that the boy was now facing were soldiers modified for close combat.

If I don't have long to live then I don't want to die a futile death……they had been brainwashed to turn their thoughts in that way without a doubt, but Naotsugu did not think of it as evil. Instead he felt sympathetic, they were gambling their lives on a mission — not theoretically — literally.

Nevertheless, that made them dangerous opponents.

Suicide soldiers were the toughest soldiers in the world.

No matter how skilled the boy was, they were probably too much for a high school student to handle.

Naotsugu interposed himself between Tatsuya and Stardust.

Tatsuya had already grasped that he was under observation. He had even known that it was the USNA and another party.

Nevertheless, he hadn't anticipated intervention within this short time period. Tatsuya had believed that the other party would remain as onlookers.

The fact that the newcomer turned his back to Tatsuya probably meant that the newcomer wasn't an enemy at least in the current situation.

He even knew who this person was from the profile he'd seen when the man had intervened.

Erika's second eldest brother.

However, Tatsuya did not know the reason why Naotsugu was lending Tatsuya his assistance in this fight.

"Shiba-kun"

Tatsuya had also not expected to be spoken to.

"My name is Chiba Naotsugu. I am the elder brother of your classmate, Chiba Erika."

That the man would personally identify himself was also unexpected.

"I will deal with this situation. Retreat behind me."

As expected, there was not an explanation, but this was not the occasion for that.

"Thank you."

If he was going to say leave it to me then Tatsuya wasn't going to contradict him.

As he retreated at a rapid pace, Tatsuya discerned indications from Naotsugu's back that he was going to make an under shoulder swing.

Naotsugu had probably expected him to make some kind of "I will fight, too!" statement.

Unfortunately, Tatsuya did not have that kind of egotistical personality. If a specialist said fall back, all he would do is meekly obey. —As long as it was to his advantage.

Naotsugu's sudden intrusion confused his adversaries for several seconds.

Since one opponent was already down, the four remaining masked figures produced guns from somewhere and pointed at Naotsugu.

CADs answered the speed factor that was significant in modern magic.

Even so, taking off the safety from a gun is faster than constructing the magic sequence needed to process the activation sequence. At this distance, it wasn't necessary to spend time aiming.

These men were probably extremely accustomed to real fights. Rather than relying on their unique magic skills, they chose an option that eliminated the hindrance to speed without hesitation. Abandoning magic did not mean not using it at all, a movement type magic — an activation of magic that halted flying objects was simultaneously proceeding. Probably, to deal with any airborne tools their opponent might have.

They were armed with guns and shielded with magic.

They were using their faculties to their best effect. As he thought, their true fighting potential had probably been hampered by their need to 'to capture Tatsuya alive'. Don't ask questions, just destroy the enemy; without a doubt, that was their original fighting style. The fighting style was extremely pragmatic and sufficient to take down the average enemy.

However, Chiba Naotsugu was not an ordinary opponent.

Faster than the men could pull the trigger, Naotsugu had closed the distance. Unquestionably, aside from the man Naotsugu had closed with, they had all lost sight of him. His speed was such that even Tatsuya would have lost track of him if he hadn't been concentrating.

As he passed by, the kodachi flashed. He had added a black border to the edge of his blade.

The hand holding the gun fell from the wrist down. The point of repulsion produced by the edge of the blade of the kodachi as it moved from left to right parted skin, flesh, and bone with astounding pressure.

His adversaries were probably aware of the instant slashing attack executed with the weight type magic 'pressure cut'.

Unconcerned with their comrade's cry of pain, the three men redirected their guns at Naotsugu.

The bullets penetrated Naotsugu's afterimage.

To the BGM of glass breaking and painful moans, Naotsugu bridged the gap between his opponents.

Despite it not being the swiftness of the gods, the soldiers could not keep him in their gun sights.

Their fields of vision were too full of real and false images of their target.

Even Tatsuya watching from behind was not confident that he'd be able to perceive Naotsugu's true whereabouts if he was facing him at point blank range.

The root of the trick was to continually cycle between charging and freezing.

Due to Naotsugu repeatedly charging, freezing, changing direction, charging, and freezing, afterimages were being produced in his adversaries' retinas.

Originally, the logic of sword technique abhorred suspension or in other words 'being still'. Without going into the fine details of the theory, being still was stiffening the muscles, halting the movement of the legs meant fixing the legs in a state where the leg muscles were stiffened, being still could lead to collapsing.

However, that was the case when only the muscles were moving.

Naotsugu used 'Beginning' in short, by controlling his body's first movement with magic, he could switch from being at a complete standstill to top speed without a time lag.

Nevertheless, saying this was easy, doing it in combat was incredibly difficult.

Movement proceeding thought was the natural state in the world of martial arts. It was said that if you did not move before thinking then you would never become first class.

What Naotsugu was doing could be called the body's movements surpassing thought even beyond the invoking of magic.

Come to think of it, with the 'pressure cut' from a little while ago, Naotsugu went from being an onlooker observing the adversary from far enough away in the area that he could not be sensed to instantly invoking and instantly finishing off an opponent. To do that without being able to read his opponents intentions, he probably did not take any countermeasures.

This switching, indeed this on and off speed was without a doubt the essence of the techniques that made Chiba Naotsugu one of the top ten martial artists in the world, Tatsuya thought.

While Tatsuya had been analyzing Naotsugu's fighting abilities, all of the masked men had been rendered powerless.

Naotsugu lowered the hand holding the kodachi.

He did not visibly relax his vigilance, but it felt like he was less tense.

It was the same for Tatsuya as well.

He must thank him for his assistance, as he took his third step towards Naotsugu,

an intense sense of danger assaulted Tatsuya.

Naotsugu probably sensed it as well. Tatsuya hit the deck and Naotsugu raised his kodachi almost simultaneously.

Afterwards,

a shining ray attacked Naotsugu.

The kodachi was attacked by the shining ray — a high energy plasma beam.

As the blade took a direct hit, the beam parted left and right.

The point where 'pressure cut' would form a point of repulsion was probably bending the raging stream of plasma.

However, the electromagnetic wave's influence would not be enough to block it.

The shining ray disappeared.

Strangely, the plasma beam disappeared before it reached the buildings along the road.

Naotsugu's body trembled slightly as he stood stock still with his kodachi raised. His muscles were probably convulsing from being bathed in the electromagnetic waves shielding him at point blank range. It was probably like having his whole body receive the full force of a stun gun.

Tatsuya directed his eyes to where he estimated the ray had been fired from.

Far away, in the center of a roadway shrouded in darkness.

Floating leisurely in the street light,

with deep crimson hair and golden eyes.

Something cane-like was pointed in this direction. The masked magician, 'Angie Sirius' was looking at Tatsuya with a gaze of invitation.

(To be continued)

References

1. ↑ Courtesy Chocolate or Giri choco is given out of politeness and does not indicate that the giver has any romantic feelings for the recipient.
2. ↑ In Japan, girls give gifts on Valentine's day and one month later boys give a return gift on White Day

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